PC GAME REVIEWS BLOWOUT

OVER 30 PAGES! CRYSIS, CALL OF DUTY 4, HELLGATE: LONDON + MORE!

Games for Windows®

ISSUE 14 2008 THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

TOO MANY GAMES!

PC GAMES INVASION!

OVER 30 PAGES OF REVIEWS. TONS OF GAMES. ZERO BULL.

CRYSIS, HELLGATE, SIMCITY: SOCIETIES, UNIVERSE AT WAR, CALL OF DUTY 4, GEARS OF WAR, TIMESHIFT, AND MORE

PLUS: DEVELOPER AFTERTHOUGHTS

CALL OF DUTY 4

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PREVIEWED
SAM & MAX: SEASON 2
UPCOMING EPISODES OF PC GAMING'S BEST SITCOM

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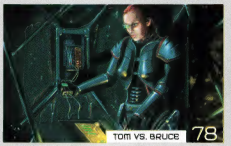

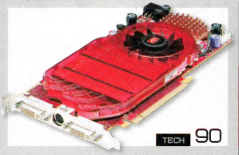

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THIS MONTH ON GFW14.1UP.COM

Wanna hear us blab more about *Crysis* and *Universe at War*? Of course you do! Listen to the editors share and care together every week at GFWRadio.1UP.com, just for you!

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– ODETTE BURTON, WSVN (MIAMI)

BRING THE RUSH HOME DECEMBER 26

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REVIEWING THE REVIEWS

On a scale of 7 to 9, this editorial gets a 2!

You know that old cliché about the raining and the pouring? Well, that's what we have here in Reviews this month, kids. Not that it's any big surprise, really. It happens annually at this time. But this year it's like a frakking smorgasbord of marquee titles on the PC, a few of which we've been waiting to play for years. Now they're all here at once, of course, making our lives a bittersweet misery of gaming overload. But, hey, sleep is for sissies! We'll sleep next year!

Meanwhile, though we've said this I don't know how many times both here and on our podcast (GFWRadio.1UP.com), I'm going to say it once more for emphasis, and to be extra pedantic, which is always a great way to start off an issue: We use the *entire* 10-point scale here for our reviews. Get me? All 10 points. Not just the 7-9 that most publications and websites use because they're too scared to call a spade a spade, too afraid to (god forbid) lose their "exclusives" by angering the game publishers.

What this means, in our case, is that a 5 is actually average. A 5 is not bad. An 8, for that matter, is not bad either. In fact, a 7 or an 8 is something we call "good," which means you can, in our humble opinion, safely play it and be reasonably assured of a good time. I know you may be used to seeing 9s and 10s liberally attached to every single big release these days, but I promise you that just because that game you love has a 7 or 8 on it in this issue doesn't mean we didn't dig it, too. It just means that we don't feel like devaluing the entire scale, or the reviews process in general, by just thoughtlessly giving a fanboy "YAY!" to every game that comes our way. If that's all you want—a fanboy validation of the game you love with no real critique or analysis—then you know where to find those.

But you know what? I'm a fanboy too, when not wearing this cranky editorial hat. My current fanboy obsession? *The Witcher*, reviewed herein on page 74. Honestly, had I reviewed that one myself, chances are I would have given it a higher score. I love it to an extent that may not be entirely rational. But that's OK! I'm not angry! I understand that that score means "good," and I also understand that we're all not going to agree on everything. And I still get to love my game!

See how easy that is?

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Now Playing: *The Witcher, Hellgate: London, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*
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MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

Sean wishes he could mash together his two current diversions into one game called *Richard Roper's Hellbalta Talgatte: Rolonsadon*.

Now Playing: *Tabula Rasa, Hellgate: London, Armageddon Empires, WOW*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

Darren's looking forward to Crytek's next game. His favorite contenders: *Crybaby: Cry Wolf*, or *Crykes!: The Aussie Adventure™*.

Now Playing: *Crysis, Hellgate: London, Kane & Lynch: Dead Men*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)

Ryan would like to nickname this issue "The Ryan Issue."

Now Playing: *World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UPcm

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (START)

Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts might be Shawn's multiplayer game of the year.

Now Playing: *Call of Duty 4, Crysis, Company of Heroes*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

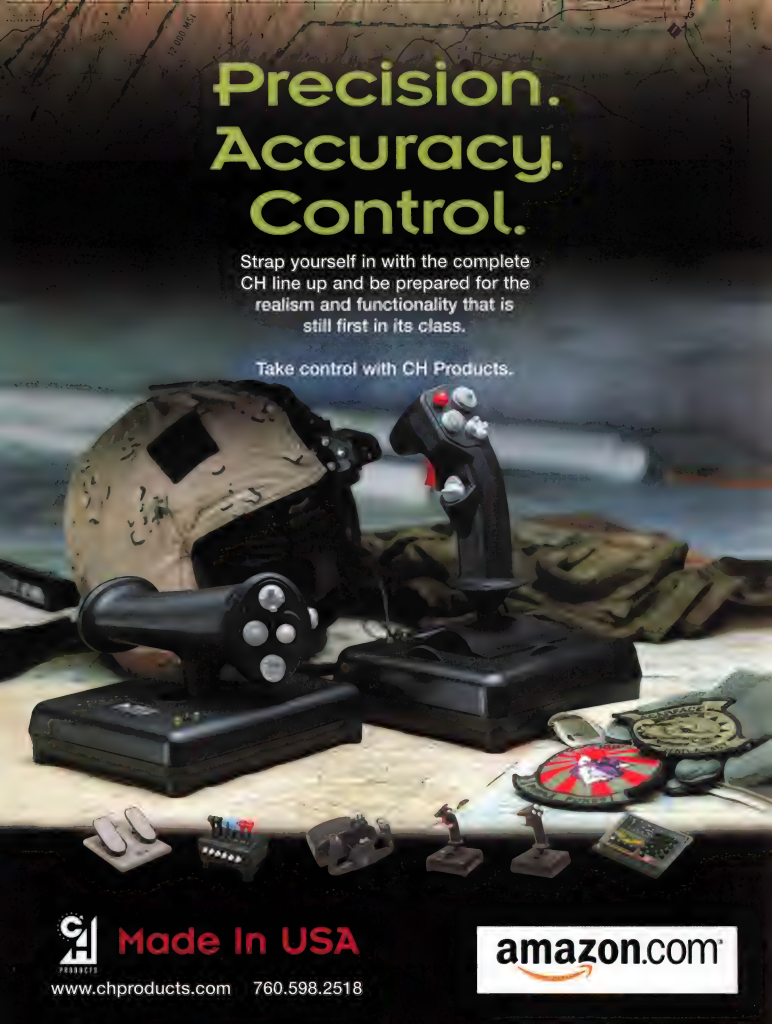
Michael would like to nickname this issue the "What the hell are we going to put on the cover" issue.

Now Playing: *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men*
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

Rosie would like to nickname this issue "The 99.2% Percent APR Issue."

Now Playing: CashCall.com's Cool Cash sweepstakes
1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com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Letters

Subtle or transcendent moments

LETTER OF THE MONTH

SO SHINY IT HURTS?

What makes a game "polished"? I don't understand! I look at games you proclaim to be "polished," and I often find them to be buggy and broken. Take, for example, *World of WarCraft*. Since launch, Ravenholdt Manor has had a broken quest link, and there seem to be no attempts to fix it. How long has WOW been released? It's as though "polish" simply means it's easy to understand (dumbed-down). What about the game that looked like it was built in a garage: Dominions IV? I think it has far more "polish" than WOW and is much more in-depth and maybe this is the big a declaration more fun.

To finish my rant, I'd like to complain about how much coverage you give to FPS games. I'm not sure what to say other than you cover them too much. So...don't. Please...just don't.

Ben Malec

"Polish" is a sort of ratio of awesomeness to brokenness; the number of NPCs whose lower jaws do not clip through their upper thighs divided by the number of NPCs whose lower jaws *do*. This ratio is, of course, relative to the polish of other games in the genre... so the threshold for MMOs like *World of WarCraft* is very different from the threshold, for, say, puzzle games like *Chuzzle*.

That said, we do not actually know what makes a game "polished." It's just easy (and, OK, maybe a little lazy) shorthand for "well put-together."

wanting more or has kept me on the edge of my seat. Yes, *Advent Rising* had quite a few flaws, but the story and overall gameplay make it a must for any FPS/action junkie.

Aaron Marten

After *Advent Rising*, designer Donald Mustard and a good chunk of the *AR* team started a new company called Chair, which just released an Xbox Live Arcade game (*Undertow*) and, last we heard, is working on a videogame set in the same universe as Orson Scott Card's recent novel *Empire* (though Chair actually came up with the idea for the novel...it's complicated). Majesco owns the rights to *Advent*, however, and while Mustard has said he'd "be happy to finish the series if the opportunity presented itself," you shouldn't hold your breath.

● **Fret not, *Advent Rising*—someone out there cares what happened to you.**

THE LITTLEST NIGHTMARE

I've noticed a disturbing trend of late. More and more games and movies are featuring an extremely scary concept. Namely, Zombie Little Girls. I wonder if the people coming out with these titles actually *have* little girls as their own kids. I know how scared I am when my little one wanders into the computer room and asks me to play...*with dolls*! Very frightening—I can hardly sleep at night. Please ask the publishers to tone down the little girls. I need my sleep.

Ed

● **"Hey, little girl! Take it down a notch, will ya?"**

PLEASE, MORE SPOILERS!

I just finished playing *BioShock*. So, I went back and found the *GFW Radio* podcast with the extended *BioShock* spoiler content. Good stuff. It was nice to see more of it in the magazine with the Ken Levine interview (*GFW* #12, pg. 22). The postplay spoiler is a good format for you guys. You can share any and all insights you have, go deep into what's particularly good or bad, point out subtle or transcendent moments that a player might have missed. You're freed from the usual preview and review constraints. Kinda like a book club. So, please, more spoilers! You should make it a regular feature of the podcast and the magazine! Pick a game that a few of you have played and go deep.

Oh, and do *Portal* next.

Ben Swainbank

IMPERFECT 10

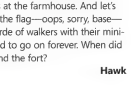
What's with that 10 out of 10 score given to *BioShock* in issue 11 of *GFW*? You make me sick! It's not perfect, not close to perfect. The A.I. is clunky, the gunfights are dull, the plasmids don't offer much of a difference in the game, the end-boss battle is a joke, and there is absolutely no replay value once you've beat the game. Not to mention the fact that the endings are bland.

Since you guys are connected, check into what's going on with the *Advent Rising* trilogy. People want a second and third game, and I have yet to come across any game that has come out since *Advent Rising* that has a story that actually has me

CTF: EPISODE 2

Which one of you monkey slappin', knuckle bustin' reviewers did the review for *Half-Life 2: Episode Two*? Implying that the Antlion level was the only "Alamo" (aka "defend the flag")—what a load! *Episode Two* is just a compilation of "defend the flag" with a really beautiful wrapping. First you go to the mines to defend against an unreasonable onslaught of Antlions. Then it's defend the flag against troops and "mini-me" walkers at the farmhouse. And let's not forget the defend the flag—oops, sorry, base—against the endless horde of walkers with their mini-me escorts that seemed to go on forever. When did *Half-Life* become defend the fort?

Hawk



● **Blue team Hunter comes for red team's flag.**

The names of the authors of our reviews are clearly listed at the end of each review's text.

Write us at GFWLetters@ziffdavis.com. ●

MAIL BYTES

What did they do to my beloved *SimCity*? A dumbed-down version? What's the scoop? Can I transfer my lvl 70 rogue into the game?

Pete D

PC games just don't do it for me anymore. I remember a time when gaming was about more than graphics and freedom; it was about games being fun. Excuse me while I go waste my life playing *Might and Magic VI*.

John Schmoe

Whose bright idea was it to feature griefing as the centerpiece of the November *Player vs. Player* article (*GFW* #12, pg. 90)? My advice is to put him in charge of something more suitable, like trash pickup.

Bryon Daly

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PC Gamer 93 out of 100
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Scarecrow is one of Batman's coolest villains, while Killer Croc's one of the absolute dumbest. We don't know who those other dudes are.

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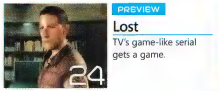

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LEGO BATMAN

All those wonderful toys

PUBLISHER: **Warner Bros. Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Traveller's Tales** GENRE: **Platformer** RELEASE DATE: **Winter 2008**

PREVIEW

A legendary vigilante who defined the terms "grim" and "gritty" as they pertain to funnybooks, Batman's one of the world's most popular and enduring mainstream comic book characters. Since 1939, the Dark Knight's inspired a live-action television series, two serials, five animated series, 11 feature-length films (with a 12th on its way later this year), and a whole lot of videogames. A whole lot of *bad* videogames.

How is it that the iconic character who DC Comics' official website calls "a master of fighting styles...a legendary escape artist and the world's greatest detective" hasn't starred in a decent game since the 16-bit era?

You know, wasn't the *Star Wars* franchise in this very same pickle? Recent years didn't do that series any favors (OK, so ignore those two stellar *Knights of the Old Republic* RPGs for a sec—*they're ruining our awesome point*), but Traveller's Tales' 2005 sleeper hit *Lego Star Wars* was one heck of a trend-breaker. This curious little platformer (and its 2006 sequel) bombarded players with irreverent cuteness, retelling George Lucas' space opera in a Lego-fied version of the *Star Wars* universe. Any rational human would certainly dismiss the concept as bargain-bin baby's fare—except that *Lego Star Wars* was arguably the best *Star Wars* game since *TIE Fighter*. Now, Traveller's Tales applies that same candy coating to Gotham City's dark avenger.

It's your typical *Batman* story: A rogues' gallery of loonies break out of the revolving-door rehab facility that is Gotham's Arkham Asylum, and Batman and his acrobatic sidekick Robin get to chase 'em all down. In *Lego Batman*'s first act, sultry villainess Catwoman skedaddles across a series of city rooftops after pocketing a priceless diamond, with our dynamic duo in hot pursuit. In between beatdowns of nameless Lego thugs (the punch-n-kick combat's an unapologetic button-mashing affair—but in that *good* way), the pair builds helpful devices out of stray Legos lying all over the place, such as Bat-upgrade chambers that give access to special suits.

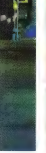
THE BAT-SHARK-REPELLENT SUIT

These plentiful power-ups award Batman and Robin additional abilities, and act as the game's replacement for *Lego Star Wars*' on-the-fly character switching. Equip Robin's magnet suit, and he sticks to metallic surfaces, allowing access to otherwise out-of-the-way locations (and goodies). Batman's gliding suit lets the Caped Crusader drift to distant rooftops, and Robin's demolition suit...well, work that one out for yourself. A buddy can jump in on the secondary character slot for some co-op action (and jump out just as easily); otherwise, the A.I. controls whichever character you aren't at the moment.

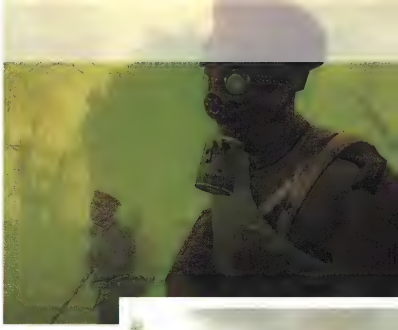
Also along the character-switcheroo lines: Key points in the story swap you into the villains' sinister shoes for a walk on the crooked side of life. We unfortunately couldn't pry any info out of the developers about these sequences, but early screens show big-name baddies like the Joker and the Penguin lurking about. Here's hoping a few of Batman's more obscure nemeses (Clock King, anyone?) make it in, too.

Unless some sort of freak accident occurs, we're optimistic that *Lego Batman*'s the Batarang-to-the-face that this franchise desperately needs. And if the game's a hit with DC comic book fans, consider this our official petition for a *Lego Suicide Squad* follow-up.

Ryan Scott



Batman and Robin teeter toward Random Criminal No. 27, patiently awaiting his beatdown.



"Sometimes, you're alone," says Phantom EFX CEO Aaron Schurman. "Other times, you're with a squad or an entire army."

DARKEST OF DAYS

First-person shooter channels...The History Channel

PUBLISHER: **Phantom EFX** DEVELOPER: **8monkey Labs** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

PREVIEW

As gamblers go, Phantom EFX CEO Aaron Schurman feels fine making moderate-to high-risk wagers. He left Air Force Space Command, where he worked with satellites near NORAD's Cheyenne Mountain, after lunching with a friend: "My best bud from high school was about to become a veterinarian. We both had different career paths, when one day we said, 'Wanna give videogames a shot?' So that's where we started...and the story for *Darkest of Days* had been boiling in my mind for five years." First-person shooters, however, are prohibitively costly. Schurman and partners' newly formed Phantom EFX would produce profitable casino sims instead, contributing to a pot sufficiently large enough to fund the bet for a bright future that is *Darkest of Days*. (Note that while *Days*' plot is Schurman's, 8monkey Labs is developing the game. "Seven people started the studio," *Days* director Mark Doden says, "four from Phantom EFX and three others. I'm one of the other three—we all come straight out of college.")

When Schurman says, "No matter what genre you're into, gamers are attracted to the idea of going somewhere, sometime in history," you see where he's headed—what gambler *isn't* interested in time travel? His series of five period pieces features Antietam, the bloodiest single-day battle of the American Civil War; Tannenberg, an engagement between Germany and Russia's WWI empires; Pompeii, at the time of Mount Vesuvius' catastrophic first-century eruption; and a pair of undisclosed times and places. The common thread is a corporation from the future undoing its own dirty work. "The company's directive is that you don't change history," Schurman says. "What you discover is that at one point, it broke its own rules and is now battling itself through time."

Talking to Schurman and Doden, I don't get the sense that the game is very interested in using parallels and patterns to make statements about History with a capital H. There's a bit of Bill and Ted here—classical antiquity? Excellent! Rather, the drive is to pit players against different people in different places with antique arms and retired tactics. Take Antietam. "Say you're cruising along and run across four Confederate soldiers," Schurman offers. "You fight on both sides in this battle, but for now we'll say you're a Union soldier and you're up against four Confederates. They line up on the path, aim their weapons, one of them yells 'Fire!', so they shoot and then start reloading. If you kill one or two of them, you could scare the others into running or taking cover. You know, there's never been a decent shooter set in this period.... There's that *History Channel: Civil War*, which was just god awful..."

Later, Schurman wants to know what I think. Until I've tried *Days* (and considering that this is 8monkey Labs' debut), all I'm able to say is: "The odds do sound somewhat long." **Shawn Elliott**

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MONEY SHOT

Competitive games get a dose of reality, for better or worse

TRENDS

Online shooters have always been about adrenaline—the buzz you get from taking out opponents while gracefully avoiding death. Games like *Counter-Strike* and *Unreal Tournament* tap into your nervous system, allowing your virtual self to operate at reaction speeds your real body isn't capable of. You become, basically, a coked-up, death-proof Superman. And while some game designers are intensifying that high by jacking up the violence feedback (think: characters exploding like ripe fruit in *Team Fortress 2*) or adding tactical depth (think: *Gears of War*'s emphasis on cover), an emerging trend seeks to spike adrenaline levels by creating real-world consequences for winning and losing.

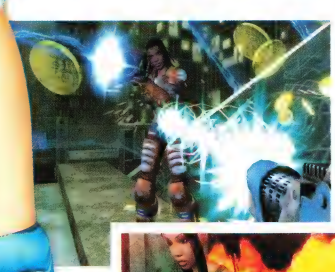
AngelofDeath69 didn't just capture your flag; he took your money, too. That's the basic idea behind *Kwari*, an in-development shooter designed from the ground up to incorporate real money—winning and losing it—into basic deathmatch play. The game's creator, Eddie Gill, doesn't talk around the potentially controversial idea at the core of *Kwari*. He studied gambling games, hunting for the secret sauce that could make his shooter as powerfully compulsive as an online poker habit. "I researched many different types of gambling games, and I looked at what makes these kinds of games compelling," says Gill. "What makes a slot machine compelling? What makes roulette compelling? I thought that if I could combine these psychological drivers into a shooter and effectively ensure that it was a game of skill, I'd have a winning formula."

The formula boils down to this: Shoot an opponent, win cash. Get shot by an opponent, lose cash. A system of microtransactions runs beneath the surface of *Kwari*, transferring money between players as they duke it out in traditional deathmatch games. The stakes can be low, one or two cents per shot, or they can be higher. The equivalent of a high-roller

> HE STUDIED GAMBLING GAMES, HUNTING FOR THE SECRET THAT COULD MAKE HIS SHOOTER AS COMPULSIVE AS ONLINE POKER.

• *Kwari* and Tournament.com both have guidelines in place for preventing players from losing their lives or livelihoods to cash gaming. For *Kwari*, players who pass a certain number of hours in a month will be cut off. For Tournament.com, there is a limit to the amount of cash you can deposit in a month, unless you can prove it's within your means.

• While mouse jockeys will likely spend their time popping heads for cash, *Kwari*'s jackpot system will encourage some players to spend all their time hunting jackpot "keys," scrounging around the level like scratch-ticket lotto fiends. "It's basically a skill-based, stealth variant of the core *Kwari* concept," says marketing director Al King.



• Both *Kwari* and Tournament.com offer no-stakes games that allow players to practice and learn levels before putting money on the table.

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MONEY SHOT

Competitive games get a dose of reality, for better or worse

Does money really change everything? *Kwari* director Eddie Gill: "One comment that we get from testers time and again is that, once they've played *Kwari* for money, playing *Unreal Tournament* is boring."

Tournament.com turns *Counter-Strike*: *Source* into an online casino.

table at Casino *Kwari* is a dollar-per-shot game, which Gill says will only be available to top-tier players who've proved themselves worthy: "There won't be too many players playing that level."

The ones that do, however, may stand a chance of making a living by simply playing the game. These players will have to be, consistently, the best of the best, as *Kwari*'s skill-balancing system sorts everyone into roughly equal games, based not just on gameplay statistics, but on profit. According to Gill, elite players will still have an advantage: "If you look at what happens in professional sports, you always have the Pete Samprases or the Roger Federers who, even at the highest level, are better than everyone else. So yes, there will be people who are effectively so good that they can make a living at it."

But the shots-for-cash premise is only one way *Kwari* marries gambling to game design. Players must pay for their ammunition (the only fee the game's developer/publisher extracts), turning every shot fired into a tiny financial risk. This, along with the fact that getting shot can exact a toll on your account, will likely make *Kwari* players more conservative than the average run-and-gun shooter enthusiast. The game forces players to make not just the split-second decisions about fight or flight native to the genre, but split-second financial decisions, too. For a small price, for example, you can purchase upgrades like increased speed, extra health, 4x damage, and temporary invincibility. You can also pay to break through otherwise impenetrable walls of fire, a kind of shortcut accessed via tollbooth. The availability of such options means that *Kwari* players will constantly face the question of which actions within the game are profitable and which actions hurt the bottom line.

With real money at stake, *Kwari* finds itself in the business of subverting the norms of online gaming. Instead of emphasizing community, the game insists on total anonymity. This is mostly for security purposes—to keep the guy you spent all night robbing from looking you up and coming over for a little real-life payback. Your in-game character features no recognizable handle. Even your physical appearance shape-shifts, Philip K. Dick–style, between an assortment of traits. "The characters are made out of constituent parts," says Gill. "Each character can be assembled in 800 different ways, so every time the player plays a game, it will be a different character."

This is also a tactic to prevent players from forming teams on the sly. In general, cheating, an ever-present threat in all online games, presents a serious challenge for the makers of *Kwari*. If some teenage jerk is willing to spend hours coming up with cheats just to beef up his reputation, imagine how motivated he'll be by the prospect of beefing up his wallet. *Kwari* runs only on the game's own official servers, which are under police state–like surveillance. "We record every single event in the game world," says Gill. "We can rerun situations. We can see who's firing at who. Anything abnormal happening, we'll know about it very quickly. Our product requires payment by credit card, and if we detect any hacks or attempted hacks, we ban the player immediately. There will be no second chances.... We're dealing with money, and an attempt to hack is an attempt to steal. It's not like having a bit of fun with a normal game." With any luck, the game will be a test of shooter skills, not programming skills.

For players less gifted in the shooter arts, though, *Kwari* contains a subgame that tests an entirely different set of skills: All the fees paid for power-up items and shortcuts will go into jackpots, held "hourly, daily, weekly, quarterly, and probably even yearly," according to *Kwari*'s marketing director Al King. To win a jackpot, players will need to stumble upon the right sequence of keys, distributed in crates around the levels. Players will naturally collect these keys during normal gameplay, but as they draw closer to the winning sequence, they may be tempted to abandon the "primary" game and spend their time hunting for the remaining keys. It's another *Kwari* design feature crafted to induce compulsive player behavior. "The lotto we have in the U.K. is a question of one ticket predicting six balls," says Gill. "In our game, you don't get just one chance to collect the balls. When you finish the game, you retain the keys and continue collecting. So the closer you get, the more addictive and fun the game becomes because the anticipation of winning something meaningful grows." When he says meaningful, he means it. Players stand to make a mint in such jackpots, according to King: "We're very confident that within the first year of going live we will create our first *Kwari* millionaire."

While the game's creators brag about throwing piles of money at lucky *Kwari* players, the game itself looks underfunded, approximately in the league of an *Unreal Tournament* clone, circa 1999. This could reflect the preference of competitive players, who often keep their settings at rock-bottom levels to improve performance and provide a clear view of the action. Or it could signal something worse. It certainly won't help *Kwari* win players over from well-established competitive shooters, especially when another venture merging cash stakes with gaming, Tournament.com, features established favorites *Counter-Strike* and *Half-Life 2: Deathmatch*. The service, now open to the public, hosts tournaments for cash prizes, paid for by small entrance fees. Next year, the company plans to roll out "perpetual mode," a cash-for-hits system similar to *Kwari*.

The appeal of such games is obvious, but one wonders whether game design in the service of manipulating and hooking players instead of simply entertaining them crosses some line. Game designers have mastered powerful psychological tools, loops of challenge and reward that can string us along for hours. Adding money to that loop can only serve to amplify its effects.

At least, unlike gambling addicts, players of these new cash games shouldn't stand to lose ruinous amounts of money. "With *Kwari*, the general idea is that gamers can't lose a great deal of money," says Gill. "But there is a possibility of winning a great deal of money, while being up and down each and every day. The overall effect is a complicated roller coaster of emotions that really gets the adrenaline going." **Robert Ashley**

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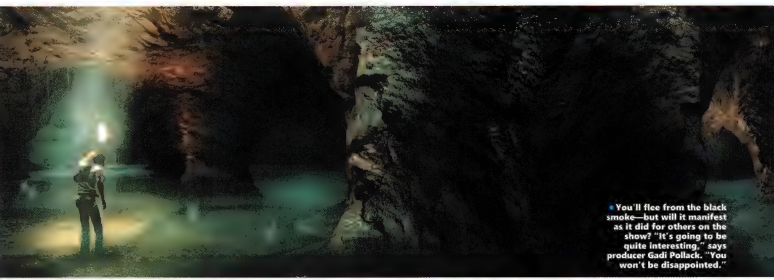
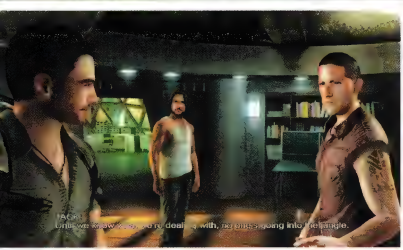


• You'll flee from the black smoke—but will it manifest as it did for others on the show? "It's going to be quite interesting," says producer Gadi Pollack. "You won't be disappointed."

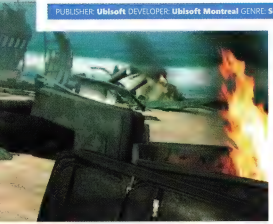


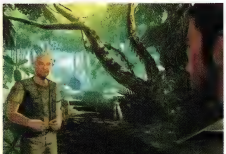
• "We've got Ben, Juliet, and Miguel," says producer Gadi Pollack, listing characters who'll be voiced by the actors from the show. "It's changing every day."

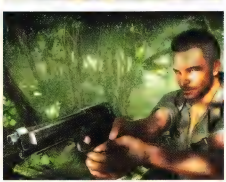
LOST

Games within games

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Montreal** GENRE: **Survival/Adventure** RELEASE DATE: **2008**







• Amnesiac main character Elliott takes aim.

PREVIEW

If you watch *Lost* and read magazines about computer gaming, you may have come to the same realization as countless others (that's with a lowercase "o") of your kind: that you are, in some sense, watching *Myst: The TV Series*. *Time* TV critic James Poniewozik connected the dots in his *Tuned In* blog: "You are on an island that's both serenely beautiful and hostile," he wrote. "There is a series of challenges, the solving of which opens new 'areas' but present further mysteries; there is a mythology and history to the island that unravels itself as you play."

All of which makes the notion of a *Lost* game as circularly confounding as the idea of *Hamlet*'s play within a play, or the fighting game made out of *Street Fighter: The Movie*. So how does one approach making *Myst: The TV Show—The Videogame*? I ask Gadi Pollack, producer at Ubisoft Montreal, if you just remake *Myst*. He stifles that with a quick no—then hesitates and adds, "Well, the way I'm looking at is making a more modern version. It's not a point-and-click game.... When we make a game like this, we really look at the type of person who would be playing a *Lost* game and the different type of markets we would hit. The younger people would want more action. The older crowd that watches the show would want a game that offers more intellectual stimulation, so we tried to merge the two together. You'll have moments—two to three minutes—of pure adrenaline action. Then you'll have 10 to 15 minutes where you'll have to just use your mind to figure out how to survive on the island." Somewhere in there is the admission that for all its ancient sales figures, *Myst* just isn't mass-market anymore—and "survival adventure," as Pollack pegs it, is.

The folks over at the Lost Is a Game website (www.lostisagame.com) take the "show as game" notion one step further, theorizing that *Lost* is, in fact, *all* videogames, backing up their supposition with detailed proofs involving quest timers, minigames, gameplay mechanics, and reset buttons—maybe they're closer to the truth. As Pollack details how one sequence in Ubisoft's *Lost* might flow, I get the sense that he really is making a sort of everygame. "Let's say you get a mission from Jack," says Pollack (NPC dialog trees have both flavor and mission branches), "and you have to gather items to trade for bullets from Sawyer. Then you go into the jungle, [where] an Other is shooting at you, and you have to either avoid or shoot and kill the Other.... Then all of a sudden [you] come upon the Swan station. You get inside, and all of a sudden the doors lock down."

Inside the Swan station, Pollack continues, you can either hack the computer to open the doors, or engage in what he calls a "fuse puzzle"—a recurring brainteaser akin to *BioShock*'s machine-hacking minigame that increases in complexity as the game goes on. Open the doors, and a timer starts ticking—signaling you have one minute to run to a computer, type in the "the numbers," and reset the clock. Outside, an encounter with the infamous black smoke locks your camera and restricts your controls to two actions—jump and roll, not unlike sequences in other "survival" games like *Resident Evil 4*. Worst-case scenario: In targeting everyone, *Lost* hits nobody.

Then you've got the flashbacks: Before crashing, main character Elliott was a photojournalist by trade. (Despite negative fan reaction to the TV series' jarring introduction of Nikki and Paolo, two background characters suddenly shoved into the forefront, *Lost* show producers Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse decided to inaugurate another heretofore-unseen background islander as the game's protagonist.) Now, Elliott's stricken with amnesia. Armed with his camera, he has to take photos of sequences in his flashbacking past to jog his memory in the present. "The challenge is taking the picture at the right time with the right focus and the right framing," says Pollack. "Once you take the correct picture, it becomes unblurred, and you get a clue about how to solve the next puzzle."

Flashbacks also offer Ubisoft a way to spread its creative wings, providing new locations that *aren't* on the too-familiar island. "We [also] have an opportunity in the flashbacks to create crossovers. So in one flashback you'll see Hurley; in one flashback you'll see Eko. We played around with that to add that authenticity." And authenticity—more than this talk of fuse puzzles, jumping, rolling, and proper framing—is paramount. With a game like *Lost*, all Ubisoft has to do is convince you that you're really trading philosophy with Locke and barbs with Sawyer, and it's pretty much won the game. • **Sean Molloy**

FLASHBACKS OFFER UBISOFT A WAY TO SPREAD ITS CREATIVE WINGS WITH NEW LOCATIONS.

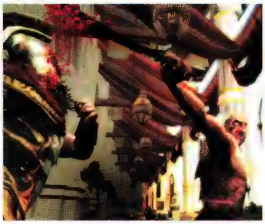
• How Jason chooses to please his four patron deities (Ares, Athena, Apollo, Hermes) determines how his abilities progress through the game.

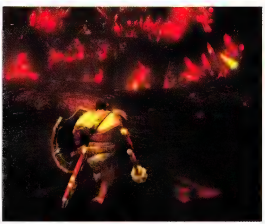
• *Argonauts* cuts the boredom out of dialogue trees by allowing players to select Jason's responses by attitude instead of text.

RISE OF THE ARGONAUTS

Jason seeks the forest, ignores the trees

PUBLISHER: **Codemasters** DEVELOPER: **Liquid Entertainment** GENRE: **Action-RPG** RELEASE DATE: **2008**





• Developer Liquid is removing some of the archaic and tedious aspects of role-playing games in the hopes of creating a more direct experience.

PREVIEW

Ten minutes into a conversation about *Rise of the Argonauts*, lead designer Charley Price struggles to describe the game's combat—not because it's complicated, but because it's simple. "In most games, combat is a hit-point thing," says Price. "I punch you 20 times until you fall over and fade out. It's a classic representation from *Dungeons & Dragons*, but the player doesn't feel very powerful." In researching ancient Greek mythology and history for the game, which follows mythic hero Jason of Iolcus on a liberally reimagined quest for the Golden Fleece, Price and his Liquid Entertainment team found tales of brutal violence that clashed with the old tabletop game conventions. "When we look back at Greek mythology, people aren't parrying and trading blows—they're cutting each other in half and smashing shields apart. So we're emphasizing lethality. If I'm able to connect with an opponent's flesh, there's a good chance that that guy's going to die in some horrific and glorious way."

It's a small example of Liquid Entertainment's approach to *Rise of the Argonauts*, an effort to deemphasize the back-of-the-box bullet points gaming audiences fetishize—combat systems, customization options, and the minor tweaks of game design wankery—in favor of a simple, story-driven virtual experience. Liquid's president, Ed Del Castillo, clarifies: "For us, the experience drives everything. If this story hadn't been about combat, there wouldn't *be* any combat in our game."

So in the midst of explaining the various ways of dealing death and destruction available to players in *Argonauts*, Del Castillo calls the whole thing off: "I can't remember the last time I saw a movie trailer that said, '15 guns will be fired in this movie!' As an industry, we are leaving behind the realm of selling games as experiences. Now they're just a bundle of features." We talk about games like the machines we play them on, breaking down the constituent parts into numbers that can be measured against the competition. How many guns? How many levels? We want to know about the engine before the story. We want to know how to level up before we know what it means for the character. Gamers obsess over minutiae while ignoring the bigger picture.

For *Rise of the Argonauts*, the bigger picture is this: Jason loses his bride-to-be to an assassin on his wedding day. Gathering a Justice League of Greek heroes—Hercules, Atalanta, and Achilles to name a few—he hops aboard his floating fortress of a ship, the Argo, and sets out to find the only artifact in the ancient world known to bring back the dead: the Golden Fleece. Along the way, Jason curries favor with the gods of Olympus, strengthening and expanding his powers as he sails, at the will and whim of the player, from island to island across the Aegean Sea. Del Castillo describes the mood of the game as "romantic," though in a crushing-skulls-for-love, manly fashion.

The product of a developer dedicated to story dictating gameplay and not the other way around, *Rise of the Argonauts* ironically began its life telling an entirely different tale. "We originally pitched Codemasters a game that wasn't in Greek mythology," says Del Castillo. "They liked the gameplay, and they had in their stable this idea that they wanted to do. They said, 'Hey, can you do that game with Greek mythology?'" It could have been a disaster, a classic let's-do-this-but-with-ninjas moment. But Liquid took to the new material quickly, fueled by the vault of made-for-gaming drama that is Greek mythology. "There's really no love lost or regret because we really did latch onto it so much," says Del Castillo. "For anyone who hasn't read the Greek myths, I can tell you: They're so rich and so deep. What really drew us is that the stories aren't about good and evil. They aren't about black and white. They're about human triumph and human failings. And that was a really great and different direction to go." And it's not like their original concept is dead, as Del Castillo hints: "The universe gets put into a hangar. It doesn't really go away. Just because we didn't do it today doesn't mean we won't do it someday." • **Robert Ashley**

HOW MANY GUNS? HOW MANY LEVELS? GAMERS OBSESS OVER MINUTIAE WHILE IGNORING THE BIGGER PICTURE.

Lord Clarence MacDonald—and his lovely assistant—are here to review the tapestries.

Door knockers, no doubt.

When Moai heads talk, Sam and Max listen.

SAM & MAX: SEASON TWO

An exclusive look at the next two episodes of Telltale's point-and-click torchbearer

PUBLISHER: **GameTap/Telltale Games** DEVELOPER: **Telltale Games** GENRE: **Adventure** RELEASE DATE: **Early 2008**

PREVIEW

Just in case you didn't get the memo: The adventure game genre's pretty dead these days. Sure, the nice folks at the Adventure Company happily churn out mediocre point-and-click fiction by the boatload, year after *painful year*—but the last high-profile graphic adventure with any sort of strong, brand-name cachet was 2000's *Escape from Monkey Island*, and that ain't saying much. Last year's episodic *Sam & Max: Season One* (brought to life by the wonderful LucasArts defectors at Telltale Games, in the wake of numerous tragically aborted sequels to 1993's *Sam & Max Hit the Road*) did a lot to ease the suffering, and the five-part *Season Two*'s already well under way.

November 2007's season premiere (*Ice Station Santa*—check out our review on page 71) took anthropomorphic detective duo Sam and Max to the North Pole to suss out why Santa had gone bananas, and January's episode two—titled *Moai Better Blues*—continues the "exotic vistas" theme, sending the freelance police through a portal to Easter Island, where a frantic group of sentient Moai heads entrust them with calming an active volcano that threatens the isle. Along the way, Sam and Max run into the standard array of familiar faces and oddball phenomena, including a gaggle of brainy babies who turn out to be a Who's Who of famously missing persons, including Amelia Earhart and Glenn Miller. It seems they've spent the last few decades of their presumed-dead existence guzzling water from the local fountain of youth, hence the wacky toddler condition (and, we're guessing, the attached puzzles). Sam and Max's career-challenged neighbor Sybil's spotted early on, too—vacationing on Easter Island with new beau (and *Season One* part-time baddie) Abe Lincoln.

Episode three is still shrouded in such mystery that we can't even reveal its title. This one centers around a spooky mansion in Stuttgart, Germany, where Sam and Max act as the first, last, and only line of defense against the zombie apocalypse. We're betting on hi-larious jokes involving such fun horror-related topics as brain-eating, severed limbs, and angst-ridden goths.

We can't lavish enough praise on Telltale for successfully shepherding *Sam & Max*'s resurrection, and for showing pretty much every other developer in the industry how episodic gaming's done. Now if the penny-pinchers over at Vivendi Games would just apply this sort of good sense to the *Space Quest* or *Leisure Suit Larry* series, we'd really have something to point-and-click about. ● **Ryan Scott**

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NATIVE RESOLUTION

A look at Native Americans in *Age of Empires III* and *Prey*

Native American Michael Greyeyes voiced *Prey*'s indigenous hero Tommy Tawodi (above).

CULTURE

About the author: Michael Sheyahshe (Caddo) is an indigenous gamer and CIO of alterNative Media, an art studio specializing in traditional and digital art. We asked him to share his views on the portrayal of Native Americans in videogames.

It's no secret that popular media often misrepresents and stereotypes Native American ethnicity and culture. (For a crash course in Native American misrepresentations in popular media, check out www.bluecorncomics.com/stertype.htm.) Unsurprisingly, videogames are rotten with such stereotypes. The 1990s gave us indigenous characters such as Nightwolf (*Mortal Kombat 3*), Chief Thunder (*Killer Instinct*), and T. Hawk (*Street Fighter* series). But the first videogame to boast a true Native American hero was Acclaim Entertainment's Nintendo 64 shooter *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter*. Based on the comic book of the same name, *Turok* featured the titular Native American but still included many of the same stereotypes showcased in other media: feathers, fringe, tracking abilities, and the power to commune with mystic forces.

After the turn of the new millennium, a handful of titles—including *Brave: The Search for Spirit Dancer*, *Gun*, *Age of Empires III*, and *Prey*—emerged with Native American characters. And while a few of these games offered little more than the standard Hollywood spin, both 3D Realms' *Prey* and Ensemble Studios' *Age of Empires III* were unique in that they actively sought Native American input (especially voice talent) during the creative process. We talked to the developers of each game to discuss how they went about dealing with this issue and the challenges they faced.

AGE OF EMPIRES III

In *Age of Empires III*, set in colonial America between the 1500s and the late 1800s, players could build alliances with various—but nonplayable—indigenous tribal groups during in-game battles. In *The WarChiefs* expansion pack, Ensemble finally let players play as certain Native American groups, focusing on the Iroquois, Sioux, and Aztecs.

"We wanted to show that the Native Americans were not just passive bystanders or hapless victims during the European colonization of the New World," says Ensemble's Sandy Petersen,

ILLUSTRATION BY JOSEPH A. DANIEL

lead designer of *The WarChiefs*. "They had a say in what happened to them. They affected the character, culture, and makeup of the nations that now rule this hemisphere. The first nation we did [for the *WarChiefs* expansion], the Iroquois Confederation, proved an immediate success. Everyone loved playing them. But the Iroquois were the most conventional civ we had, because of their flair for adapting European technology to their own purposes. So I was still worried about the success of the Sioux and Aztec. As it happened, these were even more popular than the Iroquois with our testers—particularly the Sioux. So the 'make it fun' part of the project turned out to be a breeze. That was the most important part anyway as far as I was concerned."

While the idea of a screaming mass of Sioux warriors may seem somewhat stereotypical, there are a couple of things to keep in mind: 1) the warrior mythos (indigenous, in this case) lends itself well to a videogame about warfare, and 2) this very scenario has surely played in the hearts and minds of many indigenous people throughout the years. Petersen supports this idea: "Our game, *Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs*, is about territorial expansion and battles. Thus we didn't show the peaceful side of, say, the Sioux people—we showed them as aggressive, daring warriors. I think this makes for a stronger game, and I think that people playing it may have more respect for the modern Sioux Nation as a result."

Of course, not all gamers share Petersen's dream. "Some players really liked the Native American theme," he says. "Others felt that in 'real life' Native Americans had no chance [of defeating] the mighty European invaders, and that we were foolish to represent them as being on a par. It was, and is, my opinion that the latter group of critics [is] simply misinformed about the true nature of Western Hemisphere history."

And what of historical accuracy? *The WarChiefs* does a fair job of depicting Native Americans in an accurate and nongeneralized manner. Individual tribal entities are easily distinguishable from each other in both culture and clothing. The "Hollywood Indian" look—with full headdress, fringed leather, and war paint—is applicable only to those indigenous plains-dwelling characters and is not the rule.

Petersen explains that much research went into creating the games' more accurate depictions of Native Americans: "We contracted subject-matter experts for both *Age of Empires III* and *The WarChiefs*. These professors taught Native American courses and concentrated on specific areas like clothing, customs, rituals, and so forth. We often sent them material for review and they sent back lengthy explanations and suggestions for areas they felt may be sensitive."

None of this implies that Ensemble had an easy time chasing accuracy, even with subject matter experts chiming in. One of the difficulties, Petersen says, was a "lack of source material. It's quite hard to find anything but verbal depictions of circa-1500 Zapotec warriors, for instance." Despite the historical accuracy and realistic depiction of indigenous culture, this is only a *game*, after all, and not academia. Petersen echoes this sentiment: "Ensemble Studios is in the business of making games, not ethnographic courses."

Ensemble also used indigenous actors for the game's voice work. Says Petersen, "We used indigenous actors for every native voice in the game, including those who were only partly native—which includes the heroes of the two campaigns."

AOE3's voice talent lineup includes Michael Horse (of Yaqui, Mescalero Apache, Zuni, European, and Hispanic descent, and a face you may remember from his *Twin Peaks* days or as Tonto in the 1981 version of *The Legend of the Lone Ranger*) and Kalani Queypo (Hawaiian, Caucasian, Blackfoot). »

Ensemble Studios' *Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs*.

Prey protagonist Tommy's grandfather in the spirit world.

"We still have a long way to go," Horse says and laughs. "You know, [videogames are] fun to do and sometimes you have to take it not too seriously." Horse goes on to say that his work on *AOE* was a "wonderful experience. I really like doing it. You know I do something and they don't really give me the *whole* story behind it... But really, what was given to me was OK with me. I think videogames are a new step for native entertainers and I'm fascinated by [the field]."

Ensemble's use of Native American characters and voice talent may encourage other studios to utilize indigenous characterization. Petersen shares some sage advice with those designers: "The thing many companies worry about is whether they'll offend someone by depicting an ethnic group. I think it is better to show that ethnic group as being strong and interesting than to leave them out or water them down in an attempt to be all things to all people."

PREY

A first-person shooter focusing on a single protagonist, *Prey* offers a strong contrast to *AOE*, but the creative processes behind both games share critical elements.

In *Prey*'s opening scene, Tommy Tawodi visits a run-down bar where his girlfriend Jen works. Given popular media's common portrayal of Native Americans as drunkards, the section walks a tightrope with a sensitive subject. Although he is physically in a bar, Tommy does not consume any alcohol. The only tanked characters are the white locals who harass Jen. Of course, if someone isn't paying attention—or wants to see indigenous people as drunkards—even this innocuous depiction is problematic. However, the scene neither suggests nor supports this unwarranted negative generalization. Publisher 3D Realms' approach allows its native characters more complexity and more humanity.

3D Realms CEO Scott Miller says that he wanted to make indigenous characters with complexity. "We didn't just want to create a superhero with made-up powers, so we turned to Native American mythology as our foundation and created a character to take advantage of this foundation. The lead character, Tommy Tawodi, is Cherokee, in part because there was a lot of research material, and also because they have many myths and stories that we thought could be useful over the course of many games—we hope."

Tim Gerritsen, former chairman and CEO of developer Human Head Studios, adds, "We have always tried to explore the mythology of various cultures in the games we've worked on. By choosing to make the main character a Native American, we felt that we immediately gave the character more depth than if we made the character a nameless, faceless hero. It gave us the opportunity to explore the character's cultural viewpoint."

Unlike the *Age of Empires* games, *Prey* does not strive for historical accuracy (it's a science-fiction shooter, after all). Rather, *Prey*'s makers aim for cultural accuracy. According to Gerritsen, "Choosing a specific ethnicity forced us to do [our] homework on the culture we represented in the game. When we announced that our main character was Native American, some people automatically assumed that we'd portray him in a comic-book fashion. Others derided us because they didn't feel that they could identify with a Native American; it didn't fit in with their personal experiences. We had to make sure that the [experience] would ring true with anyone, not just Native Americans, which is more difficult than if we had just chosen to portray Tommy as a caricature."

Similar to *AOE*, *Prey* utilizes Native American voice talent. Michael Greyeyes (Plains Cree) serves as the voice of protagonist Tommy, and Crystle Lightning (also Plains Cree) plays Jen, Tommy's girlfriend. "The participation of actors from the community being portrayed is always a good move," says Greyeyes. "It informs the game and the experience of the player in specific ways, but more importantly it allows our voices—both literally and figuratively—to be heard in the construction of an evolving Indian identity in the media."

From a native standpoint, Greyeyes liked how Human Head handled *Prey*: "I was impressed with the way they conceived of and wrote Tommy. I have read a lot of scripts for feature films and television and have grown to recognize the tropes common to stories with aboriginal characters or themes. Hollywood typically relegates our different indigenous cultures either into a single pan-Indian construct of some type—radical AIM [American Indian Movement] protester type; slick, corporate, anglicized casino businessman type; et cetera—or, most commonly, as a historical figure, typically from a Plains culture. In fact, the overwhelming majority of roles written for native actors are in the Western genre. There are few opportunities for us to appear outside that paradigm, and when we do it is often equally narrow in focus."

Yet, like with *AOE*, no indigenous people are at *Prey*'s creative helm. Greyeyes, however, comments on Human Head's flexibility: "The writers were always open to my comments—which I freely offered—and took my notes seriously, in nearly all instances changing dialogue or thematic content."

As for other studios looking to create indigenous protagonists, Miller suggests that "publishers are scared. If presented with *Prey*'s game-design document, they would look at a lead character and remark, 'Gee, will players relate? Do we really think players care about this kind of character?' But our thinking is, 'This is both a unique character and it helps us tell a unique story.' Luckily, we're in a position to pursue games without having to go through a publisher 'dis'-approval board."

What about indigenous gamers? How do they relate to a centralized native character? Greyeyes offers his hopes: "I always imagined what it would be like for a young person from our communities to be the player of this game. From this viewpoint, I was ecstatic about the effect of the game and the idea of placing a [Native American] in the place of hero. To me, it offers empowerment—albeit violent in nature—to native youth and [I appreciate] that Tommy's success and journey through the game [are] tempered and guided by his grandfather's teachings."

Unfortunately, Native American gamers are used to being portrayed in less-than-spectacular terms. Games like *AOE* and *Prey* take a solid step in the right direction with cultural research, native and nonnative subject-matter experts, and use of indigenous voice talent. Still, we have a long way to go before ethnocentricity is removed from computer games and more developers learn to tap deeper into our vast and varied cultural viewpoints. And who wouldn't want this? **Michael Sheyalshe (Caddo)**

> UNFORTUNATELY, NATIVE PEOPLE ARE NOTABLY ABSENT FROM THE ACTUAL CREATIVE PROCESS

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The Freeloader

Know about some sweet free games? Tip off our resident moocher! freeloader@uniwave.com is the best way to reach him.

There's something special in the air. I've got a spring in my step, life is good—it's the most wonderful time of the year! That's right, the Independent Games Festival (www.igf.com) competition is in full swing. What, you think I care about a couple of measly presents? Every gift I need is downloading to my desktop right now. Indie game creators have entered well over 100 different freeware and shareware gems into the competition that rate about 20 million notches higher than another damn holiday tie. (Jeez, Mom, enough! I get the hint! I'll get a job when I'm ready!)

In the spirit of this special season of giving, I'm bestowing a couple of freebie finds upon you—carefully handpicked from piles of IGF entries. And I only made it as far as "H" on the list of competitors! • The Freeloader

CANDY MOUNTAIN MASSACRE

FILE UNDER: **Killing with kindness** URL: **www.mockworld.net/games2007_05_10/candyMountain800.htm**

I want to punch out *Pokémon*. Maybe go on a Care Bear killing spree at some point. But I had no healthy outlet for my angst—until now. *Candy Mountain Massacre* is the perfect game for blowing off some steam and blowing up some oh-so-cute creatures in the process. Shoot cupids, rabbits, leprechauns, and Hello Kitty–looking critters to hell in this brief but fun first-person shooter. Stew on that last sentence for a couple seconds, if you must.

Here's the deal: Candy Mountain gets overrun with some freaky *28 Days Later*–like plague that's turning sweet, innocent creatures into vicious killing machines. You're the voluptuous Candy (no relation to the mountain). Your job: Clean up the mess and save any survivors. Battle your way toward the top and face down the first big boss, the sugary King Cake! Er, yeah, that doesn't really sound that menacing. You get the idea, though.

The whole game is playable in the first- or third-person perspective, and you have three weapons to work your way through a couple of levels. The crazy thing is that it runs entirely in your Web browser. Damn, these Flash games just keep getting more and more sophisticated. Seriously, after seeing stuff like this, I wonder why we need to suffer through gigabytes of installs just to have a good time on a PC.

Speaking of which, the fun isn't quite done once you finish, as more installments are apparently on the way. You'll be able to find them at www.adultswim.com/games.

CREATOR'S CORNER

Steve Escerra of Mockworld, creator of *Candy Mountain Massacre*, sets me straight on why Web games aren't what they used to be.

GFW: How do you find it creating webgames versus downloadable games?

SB: I love the immediate feedback I'm able to get with webgames. If I want someone to check out our latest game, all I have to do is send them the link...so much easier than asking them to download and install an executable. And in terms of development, Adobe has made it simple to make either executables or webgames or both. Just click their respective checkboxes.

GFW: How much time does it take to create these levels?

SB: It took my artists a few weeks to make each level, but it took about five months to make the entire game. So about a month and a half for each level.

GFW: Where'd you come up with the idea of blowing the hell out of cutesy characters?

SB: Just some creative juices flowin' like people at Adult Swim. They gave me the basic premise for the game—a deadly plague is infecting the sweet, innocent creatures of Candy Mountain, and they must be exterminated—and it was up to us to elaborate on that idea.

GFW: The game ends on a sort of cliffhanger. What happens next?

SB: The player will continue progressing on Candy Mountain, exterminating cutest creatures and saving the uninfected along the way—but expect even more weapons, enemies, maps, pickups, and a bigger, badder boss!

XTRAS

FREE GAMES!

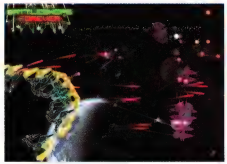
You'll find all these freebie games (and more) at FileFront.com. Plus, check out the new online Free Play column at GFW14.1UP.com.

File Front

BATTLESHIPS FOREVER

FILE UNDER: **Battlestar Freelactica** URL: **www.wyrdysm.com/games.php**

One of my favorite things about sci-fi is those gigantic space battles. I'm talkin' huge dreadnoughts lumbering through space, blasting the bloody hell out of each other. Now I'm hooked on a free game that lets me live out those fantasies. *Battleships Forever* is a real-time 2D tactical strategy game where, instead of commanding armies of units, you control a few big gunships. Each cruiser has turrets and special abilities—cannons, deflector shields, you name it. The game even includes an editor so you can create your own ships. Want to control a Star Destroyer? Add some detail to that flying triangle and send her into battle. Even though the combat is deep and detailed, the graphics are basic—but vector graphics make the



game look even cooler. That way I can pretend I'm a space general commanding my fleet.

CHAMELEO

FILE UNDER: **Tongue twister** URL: **www.pixelarious.com**

I love mods. Unfortunately, I don't play them nearly as much as I used to because, well, it seems that there just aren't as many as there were in the good ol' days.

Maybe with *Unreal Tournament 3*, we'll see a resurgence, but in the meantime, there's this cutesy little mod from the four-man team at Pixelicious for *Unreal Tournament 2004* called *Chameleo*, the story of a lost chameleon looking for its owner—after crashing in the middle of the dense Cuban jungle.

In order to make your way through the world, you must find disguises and use your tongue in all sorts of ways that your mom wouldn't approve of, snagging flies, licking enemies, and swinging across gaps.

And as an added bonus: For that full console, kid-friendly experience, *Chameleo*'s designed to work with the Xbox 360 controller.

HEAVEN2OCEAN

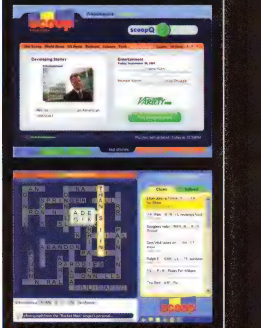
FILE UNDER: **A little rain must fall** URL: **www.heaven2ocean.com**

A game that follows a raindrop's adventure to reach the ocean? Seriously? The concept behind *Heaven2Ocean* almost got me thinking I was in for Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth: The Game*—but it's really just a neat little 2D puzzler. The gameplay is simple: Just tilt the 2D world left or right to make your water droplet move, and noodle out how to make it interact with the world. Spill over a frayed power line and you can complete circuits (so you can, say, start an elevator); roll by an open flame to vaporize your droplet so it can float over hazards in a gaseous state. If you managed to stay awake in Earth science class, you should make out all right. Maybe I should quit it with these

remotely educational games. It's not as if we want to improve ourselves, right?

INDIE PICK OF THE MONTH

It's not free—but it's close enough!



OK, so these screenshots don't exactly scream "sexy!" but what do you expect from a crossword game about current events? Check out Scoop at www.playscoop.com.

All right, so I managed to dig up more than one game that'll increase your smarts this month—only this one you've gotta pay to play. Trust me—it'll be worth it. Thanks to this month's Indie Pick, you might actually become a slightly better person.

OK, so that's a stretch, but try out *Scoop* (www.playscoop.com) anyhow. More than just some run-of-the-mill crossword puzzler, *Scoop* randomly constructs puzzles based off news feeds, letting you wrap your head around a couple of brain-drainers and catch up on the day's events at the same time. This isn't exactly a *New York Times* crossword puzzle, either—it's a 5-minute session at best—but it's a fun, quick way to catch up on the events of the day. On top of letting you play with the headline news, the game also ranks your "ScoopQ" as you progress over time. I think that's just a fancy way of seeing if we're still paying attention.

How's it work? It goes something like this: When you fire up a game session, the program sniffs out various online sources. Pick a topic (world news, sports, science, and so on), and the game then compiles a list of randomly selected hints, blanking out one word in each of the day's selected headline. (For example: "NBC shelves [blank] spin-off amid strike fears.") Pretty cool, eh? Grab the demo and give it a shot for yourself. And if you're smart, you'll know it's worth paying the fine devs the $20 asking price for the full game.

RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we're into this month

1 BUDGET BOARDS

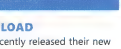
For all the people who bitch about PC gaming being too expensive a hobby, we're testing out Nvidia's new GeForce 8800 GT graphics card—and it's amazing. For about $250, you get high-end performance you'd expect from this generation's $400+ cards.

2 INDY

How did a certain Dr. Henry Jones Jr. get to be such a badass?

The short-lived *The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones* TV series, now available in two DVD volumes, answers that question. What's more, the DVDs come packed with special features and interactive history lessons—*that's* edutainment!

3 INDIE



The 2008 Independent Games Festival (www.igf.com) is well under way, and with over 170 games submitted this year, our insanity meter the Freeloader is in complimentary heaven. Turn to pg. 28 to see which games have grabbed his attention so far.

4 OK DOWNLOAD

Radiohead recently released their new album, *In Rainbows*, online (www.inrainbows.com), letting you pay as little or as much as you think the album's worth. For those who can't wrap their heads around that, a special-edition "hard" disc box version for £40 (around $80 U.S.) ships in early December.

5 FOLKLORE

It's a season so full of amazing games, that the Folklore (PS3) slips under the radar. This game combines the atmosphere of a Dark Crystal-Labyrinth-MirrorMask marathon with RPG-ish Pokémon collecting elements and solid adventuring. Don't believe us? The demo's available over the PlayStation Network. See for yourself.

6 MOBILITY

The concept here is simple. Imagine if you had everything you needed for your PC on a Flash drive—games, personal settings, whatever. MojoPac Freedom (free software available at www.mojopac.com) piggybacks off a host computer's OS and hardware so you can take it with you.

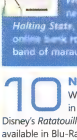
7 SOCOM

The redesigned PSP was a good first step—now we've found some strategy to go. *SOCOM: U.S. Navy SEALs—Tactical Strike* is a smartly designed single- and multi-player title with real-time squad, well, tactics.

8 GEEK GEAR

Arming the most butch nerds for LAN parties, the Cyber Snipa Dog Tags provide key tools for your keychain—a rugged Flash drive, basic computer-tweaking devices, a flashlight, and we're hoping some sort of marker to track geeks released back into the wild. The 4GB version will run you $90. The nerd cred? Priceless.

9 CYBERCRIME



What better place to plan international cyberheist than in World of WarCraft? In Charles Stross' new techno-crime book, *Halting State*, a group of felons risk an online bank robbery. The suspects? A band of marauding Orcs (for the Horde!).

10 NEXT-GEN HD MOVIES

We're not proclaiming any winners in the HD video wars. However, Disney's *Ratatouille* and *Meet the Robinsons* (both available in Blu-Ray) are perfect examples of great video quality, cool interactive features (Cine-Explore dissects scenes mid-movie), and mini-games.

DEVELOPER DESKTOPS

Randy Pitchford, Gearbox Software's übersuit, is the man behind the *Brothers in Arms* series as well as the upcoming games *Borderlands* and *Aliens* (working title). What's he doing when not building blockbusters?

MOVIES

"When I had a kid, I couldn't go to the movies anymore. So I built a theater in my house. I've got a 10-foot screen with a high-definition projector and eight-channel surround sound. The room itself looks like an old theater and magician's stage—I even have the retired theater chairs from the old close-up room at the Magic Castle in Hollywood. Orson Welles sat in the chair I sit in to play *BioShock* and *Halo 3*. I love that!"

VIDEOGAMES

"Yeah—I'm an addict. When I'm not making videogames at work, I pretty much spend all my free time playing them. I play games on every platform and am usually in the middle of five or six games at any given moment. On Live, my gamerscore is over 43,000. Heck, there's a game museum in my office with every platform ever made."

BOARD GAMES

"I play board games every Friday night. Yeah, I said Friday night. I get exposed to all kinds of interesting game mechanics. I swear I'm going to start a board game business soon.... Some great board games are at daysofwonder.com."

MUSIC

"I listen to everything but country. I play guitar—sort of—and classical piano...I can play Mozart's 'Turkish March' fairly well. Recently, I bought a trombone because I wanted to learn a horn and it seemed like the most analog of them. It's fun, but I still suck."

PINBALL

"I've got a few pinball machines and intend to get more. These things are awesome—they're a combination of electrical engineering, design, art, programming—everything. I'm looking for a *Medieval Madness* machine, the granddaddy of pinball games. If anyone has one in collector's condition, please drop me a note!"

HAPPY 2008!

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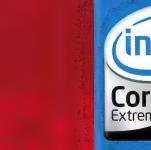

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CyberPOWER

DAY OF REC

All the PC games we've been waiting for all year just showed up. We judge, praise, and bury.

Talk about a busy holiday season! With everything from *Crysis* to *SimCity: Societies* skating into stores, we've given this month's monstrous Reviews section the grand treatment: postmortem interviews with developers, some fun sidebars, and one heck of a great-looking layout. We're always the first to complain, every year, when all the publishers release their big games just in time for Christmas (instead of year-round)...but with a lineup like this, who really has *time* to complain? • Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor

KONING

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any game receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worth playing—at least to some extent. Here's how the numbers break down:

Editors' Choice award
Any game receiving a 9 or higher receives a GFW Editors' Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

9-10: Excellent
Genre benchmarks—universally recommended.

7-8.5: Good
Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

5-6.5: Average
Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.9: Bad
Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.

0-2.5: Terrible
Never should have been made.

MEET THE CREW

The Review Crew is the 1UP Network's ensemble cast of game critics from all of our print and online publications. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as experiences.

JEFF GREEN
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Jeff still doesn't understand why Microsoft's GFW Live "service" *is so friggin' broken.*
Current Faves: *The Witcher*
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
REVIEWS EDITOR
Last seen: Going stark-raving insane after putting together *GFW*'s biggest Reviews section ever!
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR
This month, Sean worked hard to keep his sanity...with the help of his robot-editor friends.
Current Faves: *Hellgate: London, Tabula Rasa*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
STAFF EDITOR
Shawn's now playing *BlackSite: Area 51*. His early advice: Stay the *hell* away from this game.
Current Faves: *Company of Heroes*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR
What's up with that photo? Darren's looking at this like he knows it.
Current Faves: *Crysis*
1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.1UP.com

ANDREW PFISTER
REVIEWS EDITOR, 1UP.COM
Our recent unscientific survey confirms that 1UP's reviews editor is "cool" in sentient form.
Current Faves: *Call of Duty 4*
1UP.com Blog: andrewpf.1UP.com

ERIC NEIGHER
STAFF REVIEWER
Eric finally invested in a microphone headset, ensuring maximum *TF2* newb harassment.
Current Faves: *Team Fortress 2*
1UP.com Blog: TheEricFromSauce.1UP.com

JOE RYBICKI
STAFF REVIEWER
Joe plays the guitar in real life—making him the perfect candidate to play fake guitars in *GH3*.
Current Faves: *Guitar Hero III*
1UP.com Blog: OPMJoeR.1UP.com

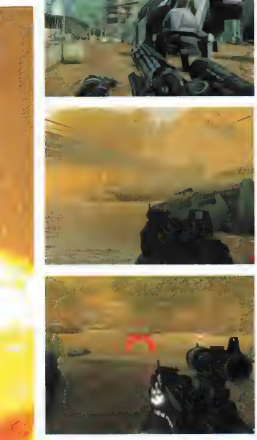
CINDY YANS
STAFF REVIEWER
Cindy's currently hard at work on the new *EverQuest II* expansion. Wait...people play *EQ2*?
Current Faves: *EverQuest II: Ruins of Kunark*
1UP.com Blog: Cindy_Yans.1UP.com

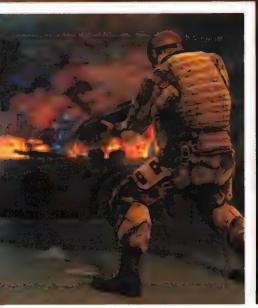
ALSO ON DECK: TOM CHICK, MATT PECKHAM, GORD GOBLE, MATTHEW SAKEY, RORY MANION

Head to ReviewCrew.1UP.com to meet all of the 1UP Network's expert reviewers.

BEAUTIFUL THROUGHOUT. MOSTLY AMAZING. BUT VEGETATIVE BY THE END.

Players' configurable nanosuits provide strength, speed, armor, and cloaking parameters. Quick-fire shifts from power to power feed *Crysis'* tactical flexibility.





CRYSIS

Substantive style

[redacted]

REVIEW

According to Crytek CEO Cevat Yerli, *Crysis* is like the gal that guys love to look at, only her Mensa score complements her measurements. While neither beauty and brains nor gorgeous and gameplay are negatively related—where the one necessarily suffers if the other soars—Yerli's point is plain: "Don't hate our game because it's gorgeous." It is a bit messier than that, though not by much.

Insofar as people play games to go places—Lingshan island in *Crysis*' case—style sort of is substance. Sea coast to rain forest, meandering trail to tropical plantation—here, contested territory in the Philippine Sea is less theme-park tram tour than tourist visa and thicker landscape along with it. Crytek's naturalist approach to mapmaking yields Yerli's "perfect 10." The sun sets and rises; plant types change according to altitude; frogs, sharks, shorebirds, chickens, and sea turtles withstand scrutiny and suggest that their world is around whether or not we're watching.

And as that sun crosses the sky, its light filters through translucent leaves—and when those trees fall, their breaking branches crush chickens below. Don't dismiss the game's intersti tched and interactive ecosystem as window dressing. Toppling palm trees onto huts rolls the simple, real-life amusements of skipping stones and poking anthills with sticks into one. Populate that world with persistent A.I. and the figurative smarty-pants bombshell starts peppering her speech with Latin: *Veni, vidi, vici*, for "I came, I saw, I conquered." *Veni, vidi, vici*, as in pockets of potential activity that players observe and then avoid or engage (as opposed to predetermined events that unfold *for* players). You choose to climb a hill; from its summit, you study an enemy encampment in the basin below. Vehicle barricades, minefields, and machine gun bunkers block one approach. To the west, lookouts walk the beach where they'd notice the boat you decide not to take. Northwest, an arduous approach up steep sea cliffs leads to a lightly guarded back road.

This sizing up of situations comes from *Splinter Cell*'s cloak and dagger; the variability and scale belong to the *Battlefield* series. *Crysis*' ability to juggle both is a colossal boon. Get a gamer chatting about *Call of Duty 4* and the conversation goes: "Where the Cobra helo comes in and blows up the building? Hell yeah!" Change topics to *Crysis* and that becomes: "I wired the building with C4 charges, fired a few bullets to bring the Koreans in, and then cloaked, crept out the back, and blasted the whole house to bits. Jump a Jeep on it and pancake the place...*if you want*." And if you want their weapons, boost suit strength (see caption) and unbury the bodies. The guns are there—you've just gotta work for 'em.

RUSTLY LEAVES, BROKEN BRANCHES

Maybe someone somewhere in America happens to have *Crysis and* the computer required to run it and yet somehow hasn't heard the hype. Mr. X in this improbable scenario is a stranger to game magazines and bars gaming terms from his browser. He's also in for a fine time. Everyone else expects an experience that the game delivers only in doses. A.I. stalkers "see" blood on leaves and broken branches, Yerli insisted a year ago. Maybe not so much. Instead, the sense is that invisibility throws some switch that tells foes to stop firing and to pantomime one-size-fits-all search patterns. Sometimes the effect is the same; other times the charade is see-through...especially in instances where choppers clearly bird-dog cloaked and evasive players and resume attacking the split-second that nanosuit camouflage power peters out.

VIOLATED EXPECTATIONS

Consistency buoys illusions, and the heavy contrast between behavioral highs (three-prong pincer tactics) and lows (numbskulls not acknowledging the bullets blasting them) makes the lows seem so much lower. Ultimately, these local lapses in the fidelity of *Crysis*' video-realism are nothing next to the FPS' chief inconsistency, a black-and-white shift so stark that all bull sessions about the game will lead to the same line: *"What in the hell happened there?"* In the final fourth of the game (maybe fifth—my measurement isn't scientific), *Crysis* the clever beauty blinks out, goes brain-dead.

Crysis' plot pivots on the point of an alien invasion foreshadowed in the game's first two quarters. The third quarter takes us inside their lair (apologies to Mr. X). Although linear and unlike the mangroves and broad amphitheaters before it, the level's a perfect counterpoint: The vessel is ice-cold and gravity-free. It's deliberately disorienting—I'll leave it at that—and over when it ought to be, when we want a world we understand. And then, supercooled air shock-freezes everything in the vicinity.

What was to be proof positive that Crytek's range encompasses more than *Far Cry*'s merc >

• *Crysis'* **island setting is as lifelike as gaming venues get.**

in the wilderness becomes history repeating itself. Dumb monster apes and indoor drudgery dragged down the finale of the developer's last FPS. In *Crysis*, it's dull aliens and a direct reversal of design logic. The wintry jungle is just a white hallway that we escort another nanosuited soldier through. Now and then, flying things land to attack with tentacles—no huts to hide in (would aliens strip shingles from the roof to shoot inside?), no shattering cover, and no three-way mix-ups with wandering Koreans. The order to protect our partner, I suspect, is a tension-inducing device there to distract us from the unfinished framework of a big plan that fizzled but couldn't be cut.

Afterward, we sit in a truck turret. Although they're there, we're unable to take another vehicle (doors don't open) or to switch seats. Before this, we've both fired while driving and flipped back and forth between driving and firing. What this means—and what makes this stretch seem as though a different studio developed it—is that *Crysis* teaches us to fish and then drops us in bone-dry desert.

And on it goes. Stints in motorized air-defense systems...that don't move. Low-altitude flight in a leaden VTOL, where defeating drones dissolves invisible barriers no one intends to notice, allowing us to fly forward, fight off another three drones, dissolve another invisible barrier, and fly forward.

Fast-forward through scraps of miserable story and melodramatic dialogue, along with a "boss battle" inherited from the coin-op class of '88 (see: *Contra*), and the ordeal is done—beautiful throughout, mostly amazing, but vegetative by the end. • **Shawn Elliott**

VERDICT

- **Unparalleled visual presentation; expansive environments; meaningful tactical options; astute A.I.**
- **A botched dismount mars an otherwise Olympic showing.**

8/10

Games for Windows

POWER PLAY

The Power Struggle multiplayer mode solves one of the *Battlefield* series' bigger snafus: teammates squabbling over vehicles instead of engaging the enemy. Light transportation is free (a taxi service is fundamental for moving across larger maps); everything else—armored fighting vehicles and VTOL aircraft—costs "prestige" points. Cribbed from *Counter-Strike*, Power Struggle's economy creates a sense of ownership and investment: When you've worked half an hour for a tank, you tend to think twice about throwing it over a cliff to shave seconds from your drive time. Nanosuit powers, freeze rays, and tactical nukes aside, this feature alone gives Crytek's game distinct flavor. The trade-off means that *Crysis'* multiplayer is marginally less erratic than *Battlefield's*—where the act of parachuting from a helo and into a buggy which you then steer to a nearby boat is both common and cool. Some players appreciate the structure. What bothers me is that in the beginning and middle, matches on larger maps are comparatively uneventful. In clan play, this isn't a problem.

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TIMESHIFT

Broke to the future

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Games** DEVELOPER: **Saber Interactive** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 8GB hard drive space, GeForce 6600/Radeon x1600 videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

Someone hit rewind! When *TimeShift* nearly shipped last year, publisher Vivendi Games rebooted everything right after reporting "only seven bugs left." A ballsy call, no doubt, but here's my beef with the FPS face-lift: Instead of shooting my way through some steampunk-inspired world, I'm in a *Half-Life 2* knockoff wearing a self-operating TiVo tuxedo.

TEMPUS FUGIT

I'm not saying the time-traveling star attraction stinks—quite the contrary. It adds the potential for some great new fourth-dimensional gameplay twists. The best firefight moments revolve around creative time tactics; pick a power (slow down, stop, or reverse time) and you get multiple ways to waste opponents. Brace for hand cramps when toggling between abilities, though: You need to hold down multiple buttons to manually slow time. The easier—and less carpal tunnel–inducing—approach is to let the suit's A.I. choose the most appropriate time shift for you. In the heat of a firefight, it's great. When surrounded, the suit automatically slows time so you can even the odds. If you're injured, a quick time-freeze restores health while you run for cover. Problem is, the autopilot keeps saving your ass. Just call the time shift what it really is—a big, red "easy" button.

That damn button also botches the game's many time-bending puzzles. Tap the time shift ability and it becomes a built-in spoiler. Your suit solves everything for you: Activating the best power for the job, it tips you off to the solution before you even get a chance to hit that "aha!" moment yourself. At the edge of a large lake, hit the button and it freezes time (and the water). It's not even an avoidable temptation—it's built into the game.

While your suit's A.I. works overtime, the enemy's A.I. takes breaks. Foes usually react appropriately: I shoot at someone, freeze time, and then book it to a hiding spot...and my aggressors go on alert, wondering where I went or what just happened. Occasionally, though, enemy forces become bumbling chowderheads; one soldier blows up, and the buddy to his immediate left remains unfazed.

GENERIC STATES OF AMERICA

Aside from the slightly mishandled time powers and sporadic A.I., *TimeShift*'s lack of unique identity is its biggest problem. The generic vibe fails to engage from the game's start to the limp end-boss battle. For a game that so desperately craves the gravitas of a *Half-Life 2*, it fails to make me care about catching archvillain Krone. I'd just as soon let him go rather than spend more time hoofing through this bomb-blasted Hooverville suburb of City-17.

A little *Crysis* here, a little *Half-Life 2* there, *TimeShift*'s patchwork construction definitely shows. What you wind up with is a standard shooter where you blast away until things go sideways, and then it's time to mash the "easy" button. After a while, you start thinking, "Hey, maybe the game can play itself without me!" I know I did. I like to think that—in an alternate timeline—it would've turned out better. **Darren Gladstone**

VERDICT

- **Time-shifting is a very cool game mechanic...**
- **...that doesn't get used to its full potential.**

5/10
AVERAGE
Games for Windows

METAMORPHOSIS

When a game goes into development hibernation, it often emerges from its cocoon a completely different creature. Here are three examples.

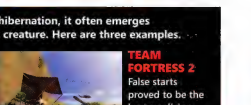
PREY

Eleven years in the making (and still pretty darn good), 3D Realms' alien invasion FPS is the main reason we still think *Duke Nukem Forever* might actually turn out all right. And despite the delay, *Prey*'s portals still somehow seemed kinda innovative.

1UP NETWORK SCORE: 8 OUT OF 10.

TABULA RASA

Richard Garriott's outer-space sci-fi shooter/MMORPG isn't even remotely recognizable as the surreal, ethereal future-fantasy MMORPG it was years and years ago. In the interim, at least we all got to make about a kabillion "clean slate" jokes. ***GFW* SCORE: N/A (SEE REVIEWS WRAP-UP, PG. 76).**



TEAM FORTRESS 2

False starts proved to be the best medicine for Valve's phenomenal online shooter. Once upon a time, the plan was to go in a *Battlefield 2* sort of direction (see screenshot above)—but scaled-back simplicity prevailed, and we can't imagine a *TF2* with any other art style. ***GFW* SCORE: 9 OUT OF 10.**

The United Earth Federation still relies on big, tough bullet sponges—like this battleship—to suck up damage as it rolls over its enemies.

SUPREME COMMANDER: FORGED ALLIANCE

Forging ahead

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Gas Powered Games** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.direct2drive.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 8GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard (*Supreme Commander* recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

From the moment you embark on the single-player campaign, Gas Powered Games' *Supreme Commander: Forged Alliance* slams you into high gear, and that's where you'll stay glued for the rest of the game. If nothing else, this expansion to the hit RTS *Supreme Commander* addresses fan criticism that the original's pacing was too laid-back. My mouse hand is still twitching.

Forged Alliance picks up the story a few years after the conclusion of the original *Supreme Commander*. Having finally ended the Infinite War, the first game's three factions suddenly face a new threat, this time in the form of the Seraphim: extra-dimensional aliens bent on the destruction of the human race. Taking a severe, alien-style drubbing in their early, separate engagements, *Supreme Commander*'s old enemies join forces (hence the subtitle) and prepare to go out like Spartans in the face of a latter-day Xerxes.

SPIT SHINE

OK, so you've heard this story more often than the one your Aunt Betsy tells about how cute you were in your widdle booties, but it serves its purpose.

Beyond plot, though, *Forged Alliance* improves on the original *Supreme Commander* in virtually every way. The engine's polygon count gets a bump, providing smoother animations and sharper differentiation of units at a distance (important, given *Forged Alliance*'s huge zoom-out range). All factions get new units, including a new experimental unit for each side (best among these: the awesome Aeon "Paragon," with its constant, unlimited resource production). Plus, the new Seraphim faction has more than 80 units and a completely new play style revolving around fewer, higher-quality troops that take longer to build. The capper, though, is the revamped user interface, which takes up less screen real estate while providing more info than the earlier version. For those used to the original *SC* interface, you'll need a few minutes to adjust—but the ability to see more of what's going on during those massive battles provides a decided advantage in the long run.

In spite of its many helpful improvements and additions, however, *Forged Alliance* fails to address *Supreme Commander*'s largest issue: its pervasively generic design. While this expansion represented a chance to bring out the gimp on an otherwise bland RTS, the designers missed some obvious opportunities to up the pizzazz quotient. Where, for example, are "hybrid" units that combine some of the advantages of the ad hoc allies? And how about some more missions that see you switch sides or control multiple sides at once?

STILL IN COMMAND

It's true that by not rocking the boat the designers ensured that fans who liked the original are gonna enjoy *Forged Alliance*. Of course, those who aren't familiar with *Supreme Commander* ought to take note: While *Forged Alliance* is billed as a stand-alone expansion, you can't play any faction besides the Seraphim in online matches unless you own the original game. In short, Gas Powered preaches to the choir: They've improved just about everything the faithful could have prayed for—but they're not nabbing many converts. **Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

- **New single-player campaign is white-knuckle awesome; streamlined UI.**
- **Still a fairly flavorless RTS; stand-alone moniker is somewhat misleading.**

7/10

GOOD

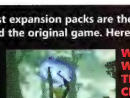
Games for Windows

GROWING UP

The best expansion packs are the ones that make you wonder how you ever possibly suffered the original game. Here are a few recent x-packs that outshone their parents.

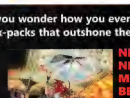
WARHAMMER 40K: DAWN OF WAR—DARK CRUSADE

The original *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* was super, but Relic's *Dark Crusade* expansion was downright generous—a tradition the developer would continue with *Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts*. ***GFW* SCORE: 8.5 OUT OF 10.**



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: THE BURNING CRUSADE

WOW's first expansion had more content than some entire other MMOs. And sorry, Old Azeroth—we loved you at the time, but, well—Outland makes some of your zones seem obnoxious in comparison. ***GFW* SCORE: 10 OUT OF 10.**



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2: MASK OF THE BETRAYER

Neverwinter Nights 2 was a buggy little mess at release. A few patches fixed most of the problems—but the *Mask* expansion revealed just how mundane the original campaign was. This is developer Obsidian's best game yet. ***GFW* SCORE: 8 OUT OF 10.**

• Azerbaijan's version of the Detroit Auto Show is pretty weak.

PUNKS, BUSTED

Call of Duty 2 (the last to appear on PC, sort-of, many people are still convinced it's a console port) was plagued by cheaters from the moment it launched. Included wall hacks (apps that give cheaters a peek through map geometry) as a pack-in. Posthumous kill-cam footage often revealed more suspiciously precognitive jerks than legitimate players. When they weren't crying "hailstorm" in-game, COD2 diehards lambasted Infinity Ward's inability to fix the problem, a sorry state of affairs that continued for six interminable months. The damage was done by the time Infinity Ward finally enlisted antiCheat:software PunkBuster into the game. Shortly after, hackers subverted PunkBuster's protection, casual players jumped ship, and the hardcore were too wary to compete anywhere other than public LANs.

COD4 provides protection out of the box, but cheat codes are common and abundant. Hopefully, Infinity Ward will be quicker to address this inevitable this time around.

• The first of several saves by helo.

CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE

Meet the new war—same as the old war

PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Infinity Ward** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABLE: **Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com)** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIRED: **2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM (768MB in Windows Vista), 8GB hard drive space, GeForce 6600 or Radeon 9800 Pro videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-32 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare's TV spots insist that, while wars and weapons change, a soldier is forever. It's a decent tagline—the kind of fist pump–provoking slogan perfect to get the patriotic blood flowing for an assault on the enemies of democracy. But drawing attention to the evolution of warfare may have been a misstep. *COD4* remains, in every way, a *Call of Duty* game; a smartly scripted first-person shooter where pressing F on flashing objectives passes for interactivity. The compliment isn't entirely backhanded. Nobody does dug-in heels quite like Infinity Ward, and blitzing through the developer's enemy-flush scenarios is often exhilarating.

ARMY STRONG

Foes in *COD4* are more patient than intractable, always waiting for the right grunt to uproot them in the right way. Enter British S.A.S. agent John "Soap" MacTavish and U.S. Marine Corps soldier Paul Jackson: The only munitions in the arsenal of freedom capable of staunching this game's infinite flow of evildoers. MacTavish and Jackson are the action-hero opposites of grumpy Russian ultranationalist Imran Zakhaev and firebrand dictator Khaled Al-Asad, newly installed leader of...well, somewhere (Infinity Ward refrained from naming Al-Asad's home nation, presumably bowing to a very *modern* fear of ruffling feathers). Both terrorist leaders have a few choice words for the West as well as the nuclear warheads to scrawl them on. The storyline is pure Macho Network, perfect for an FPS like *COD4*—nonstop us-versus-them bloodshed with no time for moralizing.

As either MacTavish or Jackson, you carry out matching marching orders: Juke from cover to cover through the detritus of war-torn landscapes, scoring first downs for Team Liberty as you go. The football metaphor's no exaggeration; invisible checkpoints send Joe Terror scurrying for his next defensive line and close the—let's call them "clone closets"—that bullets can't. When the pacing is thoughtful (*and it is* more often than not), connect-the-dots combat is thrilling.

Linger in any one area for too long, however, and what was intense becomes overtly mechanical: Infinitely spawning baddies pin themselves to the *same* positions as previous waves of baddies, becoming more nitwitted fodder for your rifle. Similarly, grenades and time-bomb Bimmers cease to alarm and turn into impediments to progress rather than believably close calls. But before the game gets too frustrating, it's over—short, and mostly sweet.

GET YOUR ASS ONLINE, SOLDIER

"Create-a-class" is a misnomer for *COD4's* system of multiplayer kit specialization. "Class" implies that you can create something *other* than exciting new ways to hurl death at rival players. You can't, and you won't find *Team Fortress 2's* Medic or *Quake Wars'* Constructor here. Semantics aside, create-a-class is an excellent addition to the series' multiplayer.

Performance-enhancing Perks—swappable superhuman abilities unlocked via combat experience—are the big draw. Who needs a new cannon when your next promotion lets you reload the one you've got twice as fast? The system inspires obsessive leveling-lust typically associated with MMORPGs, even more so than the *Battlefield* series' rank-based rewards. Scheming toward your next gun-Perk-grenade combo is almost as satisfying as earning it, and dreaming up new ways to specialize on a map-to-map basis ensures longevity.

Modern Warfare's multiplayer isn't without flaws; kill spree–based special attacks are fun but too easily achieved on the PC...and constantly intruding air strikes (jet and helicopter) are annoying. Maps are slices of campaign levels, ill-equipped to handle some of the new modes like *Counter-Strike* inspired Demolition and bomb-soccer Sabotage. Worse yet, the server browser's downright archaic, lacking even a friends list.

But good outweighs bad in multiplayer to an even greater extent than in campaign mode. Infinity Ward has mastered a formula of its own making for both single- and multiplayer combat; *Call of Duty 4* is louder, better looking, and more chaotic than ever. But it's certainly a *formula*, one that becomes more transparent with each version. ● **Rory Manion**

● **Press F to escape dramatically.**

VERDICT

- **Awesomely chaotic, excellent multiplayer.**
- **Formulaic to a fault.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

LEGACY OF DUTY

While Infinity Ward's synonymous with the *Call of Duty* series, they've had a little help along the way—some helpers more helpful than others.

CALL OF DUTY

Infinity Ward's first World War II shooter took a few notes from *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* and quickly defined what it meant to be an Infinity Ward game: heavily scripted action sequences with enough window dressing to stage a convincing war. ***CGW* SCORE: 4.5 OUT OF 5.**

CALL OF DUTY: UNITED OFFENSIVE

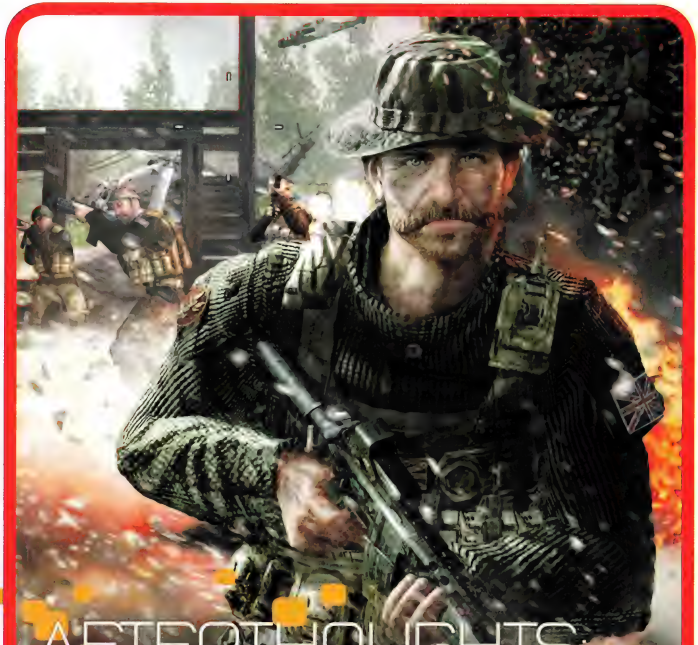
We're usually wary when developers leave their expansion packs in other hands, but Gray Matter proved there was nothing to fear. The single-player campaign hit the Battle of the Bulge, but most remember *UO* for the multiplayer, which introduced vehicles like tanks and jeeps. ***CGW* SCORE: 4 OUT OF 5.**

CALL OF DUTY 2

Infinity Ward went to World War II for the last time and did what they do best. The narrative split into three separate stories—but unfortunately, most folks remember the multiplayer for the rampant cheating (see pg. 48). ***CGW* SCORE: 4 OUT OF 5.**

CALL OF DUTY 3

And now we come to the black sheep of the family. Activision handed dev duty to Treyarch (who did a few *COD2* console ports) while Infinity Ward worked on *COD4*. This wasn't even released on PC (but it's on the Wii, weirdly enough), which should tell you...something. **1UP NETWORK SCORE: 6.5 OUT OF 10 (XBOX 360 VERSION).**



AFTERTHOUGHTS: CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE

Infinity Ward's Vince Zampella on imagining authenticity

INTERVIEW

GFW: What sources inspired *Call of Duty*'s scenarios? The War Pig mission seems similar to *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*'s account of the siege of Baghdad.

VINCE ZAMPELLA: You see some movies in there...tributes to *Black Hawk Down*. The actual name, War Pig, comes from a live tank exercise we watched. One of the Marines said, "this is War Pig," and War Pig was written on the barrel. We talked to Desert Storm vets, veterans of the current Iraq war....

GFW: The AC-130 gunship mission, "Death from Above," compares well with declassified footage. Is approximating reality important to Infinity Ward?

VZ: Not reality—*COD* is not a sim series—but authenticity. Visual fidelity is very important, and that carries over into the overall scope of the AC-130 mission. The one place where we aren't realistic is...well, some of that footage gets a little gory. When you rip someone up with one of the Lockheed's Gatling guns, it tends to leave marks. We've never wanted to be gratuitous, so we left that out.

GFW: Were you concerned with communicating the gravity of the situation? That, even through these black-and-white imaging barriers, people are on the other end?

VZ: That's important to us, that emotional element—you hear these guys calling out hits, and sometimes there's this cold mentality to it, like, "That's a clean kill." From talking to people who do this, I think you have to detach yourself. It's a job, it has to be done, but those *are* people who you're killing.

GFW: Is it tough to represent soldiers? Someone saying "That's a kill" so that tension comes close to cracking the clam strikes me as more powerful than completely over-the-top talk.

VZ: Absolutely. *Call of Duty 2* was more amped-up, turned to "10" or "11" the entire time, whereas we mix the pace up [in *Modern Warfare*]. We have those totally intense moments, then we'll dial it down a bit, give you something else to react to. And having characters helps.

GFW: The gallows humor of soldiers is infamous—and savagely funny. Did you consider incorporating some into *COD4*?

VZ: There's a bit of humor here or there. Some characters make off-hand comments that hint at that.

GFW: It's another way to humanize *COD*'s combatants. Are you ever afraid you'll portray soldiers in a light that you hadn't intended?

VZ: Yeah, we definitely think about that, and definitely want to stay sensitive—especially with people fighting and dying right now. We don't specify where in the Middle East you are. We leave it a little bit open-ended because we don't want it to be this particular area where someone's son or daughter is right now.

> "WE DEBATED IT BACK AND FORTH FROM THE BEGINNING—SHOULD WE USE A FICTIONAL SETTING?"
>
> —VINCE ZAMPELLA, STUDIO HEAD, INFINITY WARD

GFW: Some story elements suggest that Saudi Arabia is the setting, and the mission-planning map shows sites on the Arabian peninsula.

VZ: We debated it back and forth from the beginning—should use a fictional setting? What if we used a real setting and never named it? We decided we wanted to stay nonspecific. Where the map falls happened out of...sheer coincidence.

GFW: What are Infinity Ward's tenets for designing linear shooters that work as well as *Call of Duty 4*?

VZ: I think it's in the storytelling. And you try to give the illusion that there's more decision-making there than there actually is. The end goal is the same, but how you get there is slightly modifiable. I think that *BioShock* falls into the same category, except that there are some choices that you make along the way that alter the outcome.

GFW: In the FPS spectrum that stretches from absolute linearity on the one end to freeform sandbox on the other, *BioShock* sits somewhere closer to the former. But while it's logistically linear, on a tactical level it's more open-ended than most of *Half-Life 2*. An example of extreme linearity might be the sort of escape sequence that appears in every *Call of Duty*, where you're riding in a jeep or truck. *COD4* is composed of sections that fall along various points of the spectrum.

VZ: Right. We went for variety, so we have a little bit of that, we have levels that are more open than others. We told the story we wanted to tell and made the game that we wanted to make. We slowly open it up a little more, try new things—and if that works, we'll probably do more of it. If it doesn't work so well, we might scale back and look at other ways to make it better.

GFW: How did the ability to shoot through cover change the way that you designed both single- and multiplayer content?

VZ: It's hard to pinpoint on the single-player side. I think it adds a lot to the game, though.

GFW: I'll find myself trying to shoot through walls in every other shooter, too. I have to remind myself, "Oops, wrong game."

VZ: I do the same thing. [*Laughs*]

GFW: Someone I know says *Gears of War* should let you shoot through materials. You stop and think—that whole game is based on its cover system, and when you make cover close to useless....

VZ: You break the game.

GFW: Hackers and cheaters plagued *Call of Duty 2* multiplayer. How committed are you to keeping *COD4*'s PC playing field fair?

VZ: Since we're using PunkBuster, it falls on to them more than us. When we find problems within the game itself, we'll put out a patch, but as far as the wall-hacking, PunkBuster really needs to keep up on it. We push them, and I think they're generally really responsive—it's just...you can fix something, and an hour later someone changes it up just enough to make it work again. It really is a constant battle to ruin the game.

GFW: Over time, will you continue to add ranks, Perks, and challenges?

VZ: We're looking at what we can do for downloadable content. But we don't want to break the balance of the game, and anything we do has ramifications throughout everything we've already done, so we have to be careful about it. We definitely want to support the game, though. We want downloadable or patch content—it's just taking some thinking. ● **Shawn Elliott**

PC gamers may have a tough time getting used to the run/cover key in *Gears*, but aiming with the mouse is a far easier and more natural prospect.

WHAT MADE INTUITIVE SENSE WITH THE 360 CONTROLLER IS MUCH HARDER TO COMPUTE WITH A KEYBOARD AND MOUSE IN HAND

Battling through one of the new PC-only levels. Things aren't too different, though: Dom is still lying half-dead and useless, as usual.

The PC version lets you finally take down the Brumak, who was merely teased in the 360 version. Unfortunately, he goes down like a punk noob.

GEARS OF WAR

'Roid rage for Windows

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Epic Games** GENRE: **Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.4GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 12GB hard drive space, GeForce 6600 or Radeon X700 videocard**
MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players (Games for Windows Live required for certain features)** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

Big, loud, violent, profane, and tons of brainless fun, *Gears of War* is like the movies Schwarzenegger used to make before he became emperor of California. Epic Games, veteran PC developer behind the *Unreal* franchise, was charged with making a showcase action game for the Xbox 360, and *Gears* delivered big-time when it came out last year. Now, PC gamers get to see what the big deal was about, and the results are...oddly mixed. Unquestionably, Epic tried hard to do PC gamers right—superhigh resolutions, solid new single- and multiplayer content, mouse/keyboard support. But it's likely that many PC gamers will still wonder what the big deal was, because *Gears* feels like exactly what it is: a console port.

You assume the role of Marcus Fenix, a hulking slab of beef who, at the game's opening, is released from prison to join his other 'roided-out compadres of Delta Squad to take on the evil Locust Horde, who (like every other alien race before them) are intent on conquering Earth. But whatever—all that really matters is that you and your big, dumb buddies lumber from one bloody gunfight to the next, trading smartass, manly-man quips along the way.

Epic's conceit with *Gears* was to slow down the pace of the traditional shooter. Every single encounter is a pitched battle in which gamers must forsake running and gunning for running and taking cover and *then* gunning, which adds a rudimentary level of tactical thinking to the game ("Should I duck down there—or there?") without any scary *Rainbow Six*–like complexity.

MOUSE TRAP

It's mostly a one-trick pony, and on the Xbox 360, it was a fun trick. But on the PC, the control scheme's a very central obstacle: One key press (defaulted to the spacebar, but remappable) is used for running *and* taking cover, which may not sound like a big deal...until you find yourself accidentally sticking to cover at just the wrong moment or running in a direction you didn't intend because the game aimed you toward cover. What made intuitive sense with the 360 controller is much harder to compute with a keyboard and mouse in hand, where it just seems limiting and wrong for those of us used to complete freedom of movement. It's a mechanic that I suspect will just fundamentally turn off many PC gamers.

Gears is most likely to appeal to console gamers already in love with the game, who can now see it in glorious high-res detail and at superfast framerates—with a muscular enough PC, that is (my home clunker, even with a GeForce 8800 and 2GB of RAM, barely ran it). And the new content—five chapters at the beginning of Act 5—is good and different enough (a few of the battles are in bigger, wider spaces) to justify the purchase for existing fans. Epic not only fills in some nice plot detail but also lets gamers finally take down the monstrous Brumak, who appeared in the console version merely as a tease. Unfortunately, that encounter itself—after being teased again for the first four new chapters—is pretty underwhelming, as the Brumak goes down almost ridiculously easily. It's far from the epic battle gamers might expect.

Finally, the multiplayer lets you tackle the campaign cooperatively with one other person or competitively in team-based combat with up to eight players. It's all good stuff, and the new multiplayer maps and king of the hill mode are fine. But what really matters is that it is all unfortunately only playable through Microsoft's Games for Windows Live service—which, in its current state, utterly blows, lacking even the most fundamental features (dedicated servers, the ability for gamers to search by ping time). Microsoft's originally noble attempt to bring a consolelike simplicity to multiplayer gaming winds up gimping the experience...and worse yet, they charge for some of the features. Bravo!

But, hey, don't hold that against *Gears*. It's still a good shooter, with a unique play mechanic that's quite fun if you can get used to it. Just keep telling yourself "it's only a port" and enjoy the ride. ● **Jeff Green**

● **Nothing bonds manly men together more than killing evil aliens dead from behind parked cars.**

VERDICT

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

- **Looks great in high-res; good new content; solid port for those who missed it.**
- **Keyboard/mouse controls feel awkward; multiplayer tied to lame GFW Live.**

HIGH-PROFILE XBOX PORTS

Xbox 360 juggernaut *Gears of War* came to Windows a mere one year after its Xbox 360 counterpart. Here are some other recent Xbox games that meandered their way to Windows...eventually.

HALO 2

Microsoft kicked off its Games for Windows initiative with a Vista-only port of a game that came out alongside the *Halo 3* beta. It sent a message to PC gamers alright—but it wasn't a particularly positive one. ***GFW* SCORE: 6 OUT OF 10. YEARS LATE: 2.5.**

VIVA PIÑATA

Despite the kiddie coating, we loved this sandbox sim on the 360. We received our copies too late to review in time for this issue; early signs indicate that the controls don't really map to the PC all that well. **1UP NETWORK SCORE: 9 OUT OF 10 (XBOX 360 VERSION). YEARS LATE: 1.0.**

LOST PLANET: EXTREME CONDITION

Capcom's icy third-person shooter has you killing space bugs in the snow, but we're still waiting for Capcom to port its zombie game *Dead Rising*—only 1.3 years late and counting. ***GFW* SCORE: 5 OUT OF 10. YEARS LATE: 0.5.**

RESIDENT EVIL 4

OK, so *Resident Evil 4* appeared on pretty much every other system *except* the Xbox, but it's still an awesome game. Except for the PC controls...which are really, really stupid. As in, they didn't even try. **1UP NETWORK SCORE: 9 OUT OF 10. YEARS LATE: 2.1.**

SHADOWRUN

Microsoft's first cross-platform FPS promised to pit PC gamers against console gamers in the ultimate grunge match for dignity and respect, apparently. In reality, it was pretty much designed for Xbox 360 players. ***GFW* SCORE: 5 OUT OF 10. YEARS LATE: 0.0.**

AFTERTHOUGHTS: GEARS OF WAR

Epic Games' Mark Rein on the roadie run from Xbox 360 to Windows

INTERVIEW

GFW: Let's get the hard one out of the way first: Why no dedicated servers for multiplayer? Help us understand what the decision making was here.

MARK REIN, VICE PRESIDENT, EPIC GAMES: We didn't feel a dedicated server was necessary when multiplayer is limited to eight players per game. A PC that has enough power to play *Gears* should have more than enough computing power to serve up to seven others.

GFW: Some gamers are complaining about the lack of options such as searching for servers by ping. Is this something you could conceivably address down the line?

MR: Yes, this is something we could conceivably address down the line.

GFW: It took me almost all the way through Act 1 before I finally got used to the mouse and keyboard—a bit of an irony, I'd say. I think my disconnect, at first, was because of certain fundamental gameplay mechanics in *Gears* that are just not conventional for a PC shooter—like the run/cover key. I'm used to not having to press an extra key to run. Ultimately, I got used to it and forgot I ever had a problem. But my question is: Did *you* guys, while porting this to the PC, experience the same problem? And if you had designed this for the PC from the ground up, do you think the controls would have been different?

MR: We tried different variations to come up with what we think is a good solution. As you said yourself, people get used to it fairly quickly once they start playing the game. In essence, you're always "running" in *Gears*. In fact, we have a key to toggle you into a slower "walk" mode. What you're referring to as "run" is actually a boosted mode called "roadie run" in which you're unable to shoot, the screen gets blurry, the camera zooms in, and rotational control is reduced—it's meant solely for straight-line bursts over fairly short distances. Most other PC games that have walk/run transitions, including ones we've made in the past, require a toggle or modifier key, so I don't think we've done anything out of the ordinary where PC-based shooters are concerned.

Getting the controls right was a huge issue. We wanted to give PC gamers something comfortable, while remaining true to the *Gears* experience. We ran the control scheme through many iterations with Microsoft's User Experience team where they conducted usability tests with new and experienced players. As well, every time we had a public demo, we observed and "surveyed" users afterward to see how they felt about the controls. Overall we got a very positive response from users and we feel that the controls we landed on are a great way to play. *Gears* producer Rod Fergusson shared a funny anecdote with me: He said that "we originally had melee mapped to the left Shift key so that it was easy to reach while controlling with WASD. We ended up moving it to F, though, as it just felt wrong to chainsaw a Locust in half with your pinky."

GFW: Was the extra content that was added in the PC version ever present during the Xbox 360 version's design? Or was this something crafted entirely new for this port?

MR: It was envisioned as part of the design for the game, and some prototyping work had begun on it, but it didn't get fully developed until after *Gears* had shipped for 360.

GFW: Have you guys worked out how user-built maps will be distributed? Will they be available at all through the Games for Windows Live interface?

MR: If users want to distribute their maps, they could put them up on the internet. To use a downloaded map, just place it into the correct directory and the game will auto-discover it, making it available for selection. ● **Jeff Green**

"WE WANTED TO GIVE PC GAMERS SOMETHING COMFORTABLE, WHILE STILL REMAINING TRUE TO [GEARS]."

MARK REIN, VICE PRESIDENT, EPIC GAMES

PAINKILLER: OVERDOSE

Paved with good inventions

PUBLISHER: **DreamCatcher Games** DEVELOPER: **Mindworx Studios** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, Steam (www.steampowered.com)** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

Painkiller* sequel *Overdose is gloriously and unapologetically *old*, drawing obvious influence from the genre's tenured professors: *Doom*, *Quake*, *Unreal Tournament*. It's about guns (lots of guns), corridor and arena-based combat, and a hefty dose of irreverent evil. But that's the easy description—developer Mindware successfully finds creativity within the well-established rules of "mindless" shooting.

SHOOT WHILE ASKING QUESTIONS

The structure is simple: Enter a contained area and eliminate a pre-determined amount of enemies. It's "linear" defined, and you're propelled not so much by the story as by the desire to test how refined your FPS skills are. Oh, the plot is pleasantly tongue-in-cheek (whereas id-developed games think hell is *so scary*, this one says, "dude, hell is *awesome*"), and it gives the level-design team an excuse to go a little wild. The fun revolves around pitting different enemy behaviors against different weapons and ammunition, and you've got to quickly figure out what works best with oh-so-little time to think.

In such a game structure, combat fatigue is a concern. *Overdose* neatly avoids this through distinct level design, but mostly through the variation of enemy types: Some are melee dudes, and others move quickly and use projectile-based attacks (or vice-versa). Each little "arena" throws different combinations at you, and it always seems like you have *just* enough ammo to finish the job. It's a sign of good balance, but it's also stressful: When overwhelming odds or stingy ammo crates overthrow that balance, you'll find yourself wanting to retreat into God mode and really turn your brain off. You get that option after collecting a certain number of souls, but it kicks in automatically at times that might be less opportune than others.

Without an overflow of ammo, you're forced to appreciate what each of the game's eight weapons are good for, because you need 'em all. You get the standard array of guns, but the creativity comes in the secondary-fire options that are appropriately combined with the parent weapons. Using a freeze effect with a shotgun blast, for example, is highly effective—other weapons have similar synergy.

WHERE THE HELL ARE WE?

Purgatory, actually. Purgatory in Japan, Purgatory on a farm, Purgatory *in space*...the environment design in *Overdose* is all over the map. Combined with Belial's wisecracks and the fresh enemy costumes, it helps alleviate that aforementioned combat fatigue. Some levels are noticeably longer than others, and some just stink (the Nuclear Plant in particular), but each one is a neat little subdivision. Another unfortunately Purgatorial factor: the load times. Taking a few minutes to load the entire level at once is fine, but the post-death checkpoint reloads are almost intolerable, given *Overdose*'s overall pace. We'd like to see a few of the buggy enemy pathfinding moments (including the anticipated Cerberus showdown) smoothed out at some point.

It's been a busy year for shooters, but even as everyone else tries to hybridize the genre, *Overdose* cleverly and creatively embraces its purity. ●**Andrew Pfister**

●**Hey, it's just like that mummy movie. *The Mummy*. Only with slightly more mummies.**

●**Despite its limited ammo, the skull laser is perfect for dealing instant and accurate damage.**

> YOU'LL FIND YOURSELF WANTING TO RETREAT INTO GOD MODE.

VERDICT

+ Unrelenting pace; creative levels.

- Excessive load times; not enough ammo.

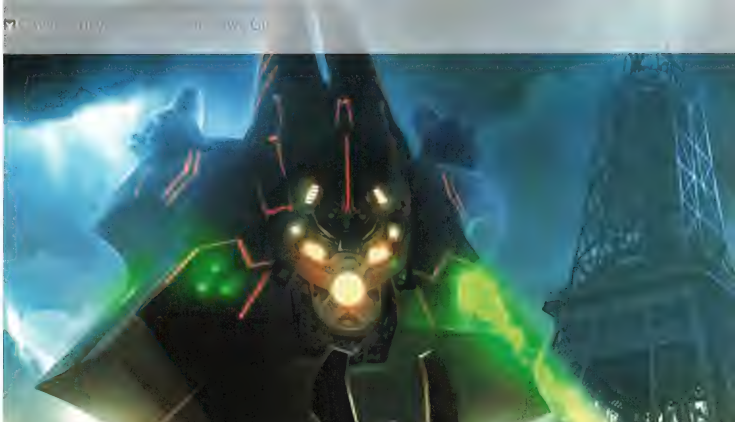
7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

84% DARK MAGIC

Overdose's Tarot-card system is another incentive to perfect your style-style skills. At the beginning of each level, check the scoreboard to see what the conditions are for obtaining that level's Black Tarot card. Complete the objective (finish in under 20 minutes, find all the secret areas, etc.), and you get a card that grants you more power. The catch? Just like the psychics you see on late-night infomercials, it comes at a price. Smash everything you see and collect the gold within—that's how you pay for your unholy gifts. It's mostly unnecessary at the standard difficulty, but a helpful advantage in tougher fights.



UNIVERSE AT WAR: EARTH ASSAULT

Hercules Against the Moon Men

[illegible] Sega [illegible] Petroglyph [illegible] Real-Time Strategy [illegible] Relic [illegible] Xbox CPU, 512MB RAM, 2GB hard drive, 128MB videocard [illegible] 2-8 players [Online for Windows Live Gold required for some features] [illegible] Near Final Retrievable

REVIEW

In some alternate universe, the silhouettes of Joel Robinson, Crow T. Robot, and Tom Servo sit mocking a triple feature of *Hercules Against the Moon Men*, *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*, and *Universe at War: Earth Assault*, in which anime androids fight *War of the Worlds* tripods and accidentally wake up a sleeping kingdom of Greek gods, presented in stunning Amazoscope™ 3D! In our own universe, a butterfly flapped its wings, and the latter became a three-sided asymmetrical *StarCraft*-y sort of RTS instead of a 1950s science-fiction B-movie. If the developers had the time or inclination to flesh out a fourth faction, I'm certain one of its hero units would've been the Easter Bunny.

COMMANDER AMERICA AND THE ROBOTS FROM MARS

High camp almost derails *UAW* from the start: The single-player prelude casts you as a gruff military caricature you can't possibly grow to like, trailing units with names no more descriptive than "tank" or "rocket launcher guy" in his wake. Aliens attack, the Washington Monument topples, and mankind makes its last stand a few feet from the White House—as inauspicious an opening to a videogame as I've ever seen—but dumb clichés prove the perfect psychological setup for the interstellar android Novus to teleport in and save the day (and your sanity).

After that, the structure's familiar but fun: Play through the Novus faction's minicampaign, see the other side of the story as their foe (here, the Hierarchy, who are more interesting before you discover they're basically just Halo's Covenant), and then play as the Masari—the powerful mystical weirdos who've been sort of sitting on the sidelines all the while. In addition to the usual mix of "defend against waves!" and "now you have no base, just a hero unit!" missions, the campaign also features a Risk-cum-*Rise of Nations*-cum-*Dawn of War: Dark Crusade* "territorial conquest" game linking the RTS battles—but curiously, it only adds that layer during the final leg of the campaign. It's symptomatic of one of the campaign's big weaknesses—that it seems to stop just as it's getting started, leaving advanced concepts for the global-conquest scenarios and skirmishes.

THEY CAME WITHOUT WARNING!

The game welcomes multiple play styles: The Novus spin a web of light across the map, which units zip through as little balls of energy—making them excellent defenders during skirmishes, since their entire army can warp from point A to point B in seconds. The Instant access is exhilarating, but their myriad "press-to-activate" powers are a bit overwhelming. The Masari offer the flip-side philosophy, instead changing wholesale between offensive or defensive modes with almost zero micromanagey buttons. The Hierarchy, who don't build bases so much as lumbering mini-Death Stars, dare to be the most different—and have the most obvious flaws and overpowered abilities. The A.I. handles them like a rock-paper-scissors player missing his index and middle fingers: I lost count of how many times I wiped out an entire Hierarchy base with a handful of uncontested Masari flying units. I still, however, can't come up with a suitable

If you want "frantic," enable the DEFCON option in multiplayer skirmishes, which unlocks tech trees and hero units at regular (and quick) intervals.

Not much has changed since the nuke: Certain structures allow you to build superweapons. This Black Hole doesn't discriminate against friend or foe.

counter for their terrifying Science Walkers, whose unit-possessing Mind Magnets can just go to hell.

Each side handles resources differently, too, which will likely wind up separating the *UAW* lovers from the haters. Both the Hierarchy and Novus deploy harvesting units to automatically appropriate junk fan-flung across the map, while the Masari simply construct structures anywhere, which generate resources indefinitely. That means multiplayer battles focus more on breaking your bases and less on localized territorial back-and-forth.

So sophistication's not *UAW*'s strong suit. It flaunts its influences on its sleeve and thrives on its outlandishness—an exploitation RTS, suitable for midnight screenings. **Sean Molloy**

VERDICT

7/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

Cool, great-looking, diverse factions; well-done UI; campy charm.

Campaign undersells the advanced concepts; unexciting maps.

WHAT ABOUT GFW LIVE?

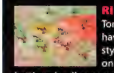
Unfortunately, Microsoft and Sega couldn't get their ducks in a row for us to play *Universe at War* over Games for Windows Live in time for this review—so if you're serious about online multiplayer, check out GFW14.1UP.com for an addendum after the game launches on December 4. In the meantime: According to Sega, Silver (i.e., free) members can host matches and browse available skirmishes, while Gold members enjoy access to the game's Conquer the World mode—which is not the same as the "global conquest" strategy game mentioned in the review. Instead, it's glorified matchmaking that connects Live players based on which maps they "conquered" (read: won a victory online) with their Live profile.

DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

Universe at War **gathered its resources (read: got its ideas) from a bunch of RTS games that tried to break the mold—or at least stretch the boundaries a little. Here are some of its most obvious influences.**

STARCRAFT

Blizzard popularized the idea of extreme asymmetry. It's easy to spot the similarities between the Novus' power network and the Protoss pylons—or the Hierarchy's mobile assembly walkers and the Terrans' slow-flying bases. ***CGW*** **SCORE: 5 OUT OF 5.**



RISE OF NATIONS

Tons of other games have dropped a *Risk*-style board game on top of their RTS battles—lending some context and strategic connection to the flagship fights—but the Conquer the World mode of Big Huge Games' breakthrough RTS is still one of the most satisfying. ***CGW*** **SCORE: 4 OUT OF 5.**

DEFCON

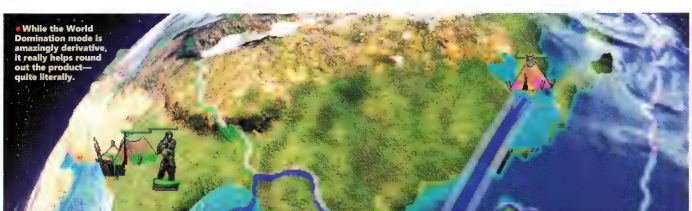
One of *UAW*'s multiplayer modes shares a name and notion with Introversion's stylized little strategy game that could: At timed intervals, more of your units and skills become available, until DEFCON 1 hits, and it's all-out war. ***GFW*** **SCORE: 9 OUT OF 10.**

STAR WARS: EMPIRE AT WAR

OK, this one's a gimme, since *Universe at War* developer Petroglyph made it, too. *Empire at War*'s widely regarded as the best *Star Wars* RTS—though in the company of *Force Commander* and *Galactic Battlegrounds*, that's not saying much. ***CGW*** **SCORE: 4 OUT OF 5.**

WAR OF THE WORLDS

The human-harvesting Hierarchy are clearly inspired by H.G. Wells' novel (or, probably more accurately, Steven Spielberg's movie take), but GT Interactive beat Petroglyph to the punch with an RTS based on the *War of the Worlds* musical by Jeff Wayne. All righty, then. ***CGW*** **SCORE: 2.5 OUT OF 5.**



● While the World Domination mode is amazingly derivative, it really helps round out the product—quite literally.

EMPIRE EARTH III

Where has all the research gone?

PUBLISHER: Vivendi Games DEVELOPER: Mad Doc Software GENRE: Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.7GHz CPU (3.2GHz in Windows Vista), 512MB RAM (1GB in Vista), 6.5GB hard drive space (4.5GB in Vista), 128MB videocard (256MB in Vista) MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

REVIEW

During *Empire Earth II's* postmortem meeting, one of the developers said, "OK, here's what I'm hearing: 'It's just too *complicated*.'" Another guy on his fifth martini countered with, "Hey, *hic*, 'snot our fault they're jus' too shtoopid ta play...*hic*... our game. Right? *Hic*.... Am I right...*hic*?" Everyone else looked at him like he'd just stepped out of a Geico commercial.

Apparently, they took a secret vow to make *Empire Earth III* a whole lot more...*sexah*. Depth and substance give way to accessibility and style—and you, the hardcore strategy player and *Empire Earth* fan, are the victim.

THE K.I.S.S. PRINCIPLE

Empire Earth III is like the redheaded stepchild of *Civilization IV* and *Rise of Nations*. It takes elements from each, dumbs them down, and ends up with a pretty one-dimensional vestige of what most lovers of the genre expect.

The game's a newbie's dream, though: A very well-thought-out tutorial segments the basics into really accessible gameplay chunks, with all the encouragement an 8-year-old needs. "Click and drag, Skippy. We *know* you can do it!" Cuteness is everywhere you look, from the gingerbread house–esque structures to the builder retorts ("I'm ready for everything! Except maybe girls...") to the really bad puns ("Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.") to the character animations that look a lot like Claymation. It's as if Davey, Goliath, Wallace, Gromit, and Rudolph could appear at any moment...wielding claymores.

Resources are resources—no wood, stone, incense, tin, vomit, etc.—and wealth is wealth. The tech trees are unsophisticated, though each faction has its own. Diplomacy (at least in dealing with the A.I.) is disturbingly simplistic. Easier to use than *EE2*'s model, it is—again—a good piece of "intro" fare. In the single-player global domination mode, the in-province minimissions give newcomers a good taste of multitasking on the fly.

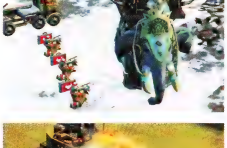
EE3 IS LIKE THE REDHEADED STEPCHILD OF *CIV IV* AND *RISE OF NATIONS*.

THE "OW" FACTOR

The game's intense instability and memory leaks act as unfortunate deterrents to the fun stuff, though. "Woot, I've won!" you rejoice. "Now let's analyze those stats." Crash message: "*Empire Earth III* has stopped working." Well, duh. The game even throws some fun "out of video memory" messages, even on top-end videocards. And when things *aren't* acting up, the A.I.'s gimped. It executes some unbelievable "strategies," like almost never leaving its beginning archipelago island—even in expert mode. Unit movement is beyond clunky, especially for ships; even with waypoints, you constantly have to babysit your formations.

Oh, and all we can say about multiplayer (since the version we reviewed didn't handle multiplayer at all—caveat: *patch* the game) is that many reports show serious problems with connecting, staying connected, or finding a playmate at all.

All told, this one-note sex queen takes the series down a peg. Rick Goodman (creator of *Empire Earth*) is probably rolling over in his grave. Oh wait—he's alive! Someone should hand him that martini. Do you think he knows the best way to save money on his car insurance? ● **Cindy Yans**



● Sticks and stones: the usual conundrum of archers destroying buildings.

VERDICT

5/10

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

+ Very accessible; racial diversity; comprehensive tutorial; silly voices.

– Technical issues; clumsy pathing; long load times; simple tech tree; silly voices.

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HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC V: TRIBES OF THE EAST

Orcs are people, too

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Nival Interactive** GENRE: **Turn-Based Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (digitalstore.ubi.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.5GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 3GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

Orcs don't get much love. Before *WarCraft*, you'd be hard-pressed to find a sympathetic Orc anywhere. So it takes a while to get used to the idea of controlling Orcs as the good guys (sort of) in this latest (and last) expansion to *Heroes of Might and Magic V*. Developer Nival Interactive took advantage of our ignorance of Orc culture, inventing a unique savage-hippie backstory that makes the species seem vibrant, believable, and conveniently connected to *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*, the series' first-person cousin.

If you don't like the *Heroes* model of high-fantasy construction, combat, and conquest, *Tribes of the East* won't do it for you. Everyone else gets a beefy, feature-laden stand-alone product so packed with content as to nearly qualify as a full game on its own. *Tribes* wraps up the single-player *Heroes V* storyline and introduces the Orc faction, thus far seen only as villains in *Dark Messiah* or mentioned in passing in *Heroes*. Their units, techniques, and unique mechanics differentiate the Orc experience nicely. Orcs are tribal folk whose behavior and use of magic differs from other races' strategies; their most striking aspect is Blood Rage, a feature that protects your troops from damage and increases as your troops fight with mindless aggression, but plummets if you defend or even pause on the battlefield. High-level Orc creatures, such as Cyclopes and Pao Kai Wyverns, come straight out of *Dark Messiah* and fit elegantly into the strategic game.

Nival didn't skimp on other much-needed improvements, either. All troop types now have two upgrade paths, allowing for massive army customization even in same-faction scenarios. The new content includes a bevy of additional spells and locations, and now certain powerful artifacts combine to form superitems. The developers also did some housework in order to balance and enhance overall play: You can now switch between troop upgrade paths whenever you like, burn small-fry units for hero experience, and deploy certain spells on the battlefield with greater ease.

The single-player content explores Undead, Orc, and Academy storylines, and experienced players are looking at a 20-hour campaign (at the shortest). As lengthy as that sounds, *Heroes* has always been less about the sometimes bombastically written plot and more about hotseat multiplayer and skirmish maps. Alas, Nival missed the boat (again) by including only 10 and five maps of each mode, respectively. These maps are satisfactorily designed, though, and—along with the map generator and editor—keep the experience from growing stale beyond the campaign. You get a lot of content for your $30, if not in all the right places.

Nival took *Heroes V* in a new, elaborately lush artistic direction, which remains as beautiful as ever—and well-connected to the *Dark Messiah* look—in this expansion. General game performance is unfortunately unimproved, and things sometimes slow to a near-crawl on the tactical map. Ultimately, *Tribes of the East* manages to gobble time as effectively as any good *Heroes* installment; it's an impressive final outing for *Heroes V*—and another strong showing from Nival. **Matthew Sakey**

VERDICT

- **Beautiful style; engaging play; many well-balanced new additions; nice tie-ins to *Dark Messiah*.**
- **Stuttering issues; too few skirmish/multiplayer maps.**

7/10

GOOD

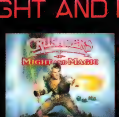
Games for Windows

SPIN-OFFS OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

***Heroes* isn't the only offshoot of the *Might and Magic* RPG series—but it's the best one.**

DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

Arkane Studios (developer of the upcoming shooter *The Crossing*) turned *Might and Magic* into a first-person shooter with RPG elements. The uninspired rail-ride single-player was overshadowed (a little) by its tactically exciting multiplayer. ***GFW* SCORE: 4 OUT OF 10.**



CRUSADERS OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

This third-person action-RPG is about as generic as the phrase "third-person action-RPG." It features lots of hacking and slashing as a put-upon fantasy fellow named Drake, and we're not surprised this spin-off didn't make it to *Crusaders V*. ***CGW* SCORE: 2 OUT OF 5.**

LEGENDS OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

What was once destined to be a first-person RPG eventually morphed into a first-person multiplayer, team-based FPS—a sort of fantasy *Team Fortress*. That's a fairly jarring change of plan, don't you think? It showed in the final product. ***CGW* SCORE: 1.5 OUT OF 5.**

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◆ Venues—like this Opera House—are places your citizens can go to blow off steam. Like many major buildings, this one also provides side benefits, although some of them aren't clearly explained.

◆ Seeing lots of "simolean" signs floating over your buildings means you're doing something right.

SIMCITY: SOCIETIES

Electronic Arts | Tilted Mill Entertainment | City Management Simulation | Retail | Everyone 10+ | 1.7GHz CPU (2GHz to Windows Vista), 512MB RAM (1GB in Windows Vista), 2.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard | None | None Final Reviewable

REVIEW

Oh, ye faithful *SimCity* fans, all that ye've heard is true! *SimCity: Societies* breaks step with the franchise we knew and loved! Series-newcomer Tilted Mill forsakes time-honored Maxis dogma and fundamentally alters the way *SimCity* works. Venerated land-zoning procedures are axed, complex infrastructure systems (i.e., anything beyond simple roads and transit stops) are eliminated, and even our beloved public works pass into the Great Beyond!

Phew. Nothing like a little pulpit-pounding to get your nose turned up, right? Well, meditate on this while you're staring at the ceiling: With those changes, Tilted Mill makes *Societies* innovative and entertaining enough to rank with any of its cousins.

CITY OF GOD

The designers labeled *Societies* a "social engineering simulator" (as opposed to a plain-ol' "city builder"), but the truth is that *Societies* is actually a hybrid. It owes as much of its game design to previous *SimCity* games as it does to another, little-known Maxis title called *The Sims*. In that game, you nurture a single individual to ever-greater levels of success by fulfilling his various needs: food, entertainment, and so on. *Societies* works the same way, only a whole city stands in for that individual—and the city's six "social energies" replace individual Sims' needs. *Societies* creates the pervasive sensation that your city is a single entity—living, breathing, working as a whole. Every choice you make affects your entire city and, as a result, new challenges grow from earlier ones. Since *Societies* features no true endgame goals ("achievement" rewards act as constant carrots), the game keeps you interested by offering ever-evolving choices.

And most of those choices entail selecting and placing individual buildings on the map. Doing so both produces and requires one or more of the aforementioned social energies: Prosperity, Spirituality, Authority, Productivity, Creativity, and Knowledge. Interplay among these energies—and your continuing quest to increase their power—is what you'll spend the lion's share of your time handling. If you plunk down an office building to give your populace a place to work, you start generating some tax revenue. In addition to producing money, the office building also provides a Sir Richard Branson–worthy mountain of Prosperity. Simultaneously, however, it demands that you bump up your Productivity citywide before it will function properly. Productivity, then, comes by building slums, which house the unwashed masses who work in your office building (though presumably not in the actual offices). Slums can produce criminals, though, which necessitate law enforcement buildings, which produce Authority but require Knowledge...and so it goes.

Alternatively, you can restrict your city to pursuing limited energies. This affects

> A PLATE-SPINNING EXTRAVAGANZA THAT KEEPS ENCOURAGING YOU TO CHUCK IN MORE AND MORE PLATES—JUST TO SEE WHAT YOU'RE CAPABLE OF.

• Because of the way *Societies* balances "social energies," your cities often end up with distinct neighborhoods. Here, you can see my tenements at frame right, counterbalanced by my pristine downtown, frame left.

• Focusing on different "social energies" or combinations thereof tends to produce different kinds of cities. Combining Spirituality with Productivity creates a small-town, Middle America–type city. Go U.S.A.!

Our kind of city

what achievements you'll chase and leads to towns with specific looks and feels. Authority/Production gives that *1984* panache, while a Prosperity/Creativity-driven city ends up looking like the Upper East Side. Regardless of how you play, *Societies* quickly becomes an elaborate plate-spinning extravaganza that keeps encouraging you to chuck in more and more plates—just to see what you're capable of.

URBAN BLIGHT

The problem is that the further you take it, the more you come eyeball to eyeball with *Societies*' man in the black pajamas: insufficient info. The game helpfully includes a bevy of graphical filters to help you select what buildings you want, but it doesn't spend enough time telling you what those buildings actually do. Venues, for example, often have a special "action" button that provides a temporary benefit...but the game doesn't sufficiently explain what specific effect said benefits have. What does generating more Tycoons in my city give me? Why would I want to "unleash a wave of Mimes" from my clown school? And what's the downside to using these powers? With so many buildings, each with individual characteristics and powers, the lack of cross-referenced rollover tips (or at least more detailed ones) adds needless guesswork to a process that ought to be smooth.

And speaking of smooth, *Societies* isn't. When your population reaches 10,000, you can expect the game to crawl (I routinely witnessed sub-30 frames per second on a machine I built to rock *Crysis*). In a game where constant zooming, map rotation, and precise building placement are key, laggy performance is more than a mere annoyance.

Course, when you reinvent the omelet, you're gonna break a few wheels...or something. And, despite its few slipups, the core of *Societies* is strong enough—and the gameplay addictive enough—that even the stodgiest traditionalist will find something to shout about. Can I get an "amen?" • **Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

7/10

GOOD

+ New gameplay model revitalizes the series; panoply of building options.

– May alienate series diehards; lack of sufficient in-game info; resource hoggery.

Games for Windows

SIM EVERYTHING

It's been a long road from 1989's *SimCity* to today's *SimCity Societies*—with plenty of detours along the way. Here are a few of the stranger landmarks.

SIMANT

One of the first SimSpin-offs, *SimAnt* put you in charge of a colony of common ants, trying to infiltrate a family's home and basically become the top species in the local insect ecology.

SIMMARS

Terraform and colonize the red planet—that was the apparent premise of *SimMars*, which never actually saw the light of our yellow sun. Word has it the game was put on indefinite hold after Maxis realized what a huge hit it had in *The Sims*.

SIMCOPTER

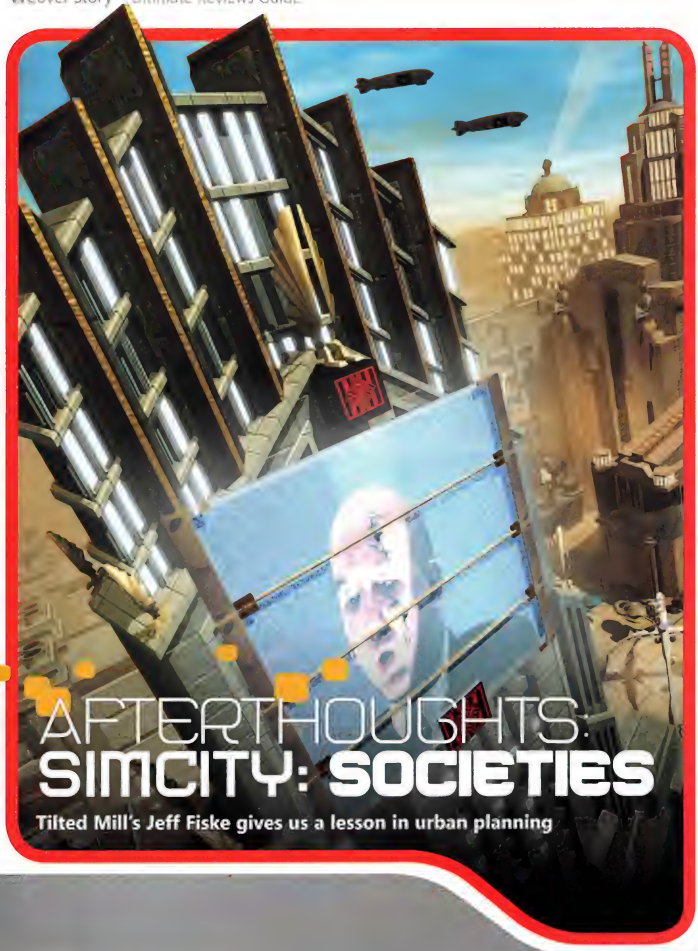
You're a helicopter pilot dutifully manipulating traffic, crime, and natural disasters—but sadly, it's mostly known as "that one game where that programmer secretly inserted a bunch of guys kissing."

SIMREFINERY

In a 1994 interview with *Wired* magazine, Will Wright revealed that after the success of the original *SimCity*, several corporations asked Maxis to simulate their businesses. Among them: Chevron, who commissioned *SimRefinery* to train its employees.

SIMSVILLE

Intended as the middle ground between Maxis' *SimCity* and *The Sims* lines (your Sims would live in SimsVille, you see), this hybrid was canceled in its final stages of development—though pieces of what would have been appeared in subsequent games in both series.



AFTERTHOUGHTS: SIMCITY: SOCIETIES

Tilted Mill's Jeff Fiske gives us a lesson in urban planning

INTERVIEW

> "PLEASE REMEMBER WHERE THE TERM 'SIMS' COMES FROM. IT WAS *SIMCITY* FIRST— NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND."
> –JEFF FISKE, DESIGN DIRECTOR, TILTED MILL ENTERTAINMENT

GFW: Why break with tradition so sharply? The zoning mechanic, for example—a definite *SimCity* hallmark—you guys dropped.

JEFF FISKE: In keeping with Tilted Mill's and EA's vision of the product, we developed a system for maximum creativity and flexibility, but without forcing the player to surrender control. In many ways, this game is about building any city you want, and controlling that whole process [to an extent] beyond what a zoning model offers. We also made every effort to attain a unique feel for the buildings and maximum variety in mixing and matching them. It's something that tends to get watered down in a zoning system. For example, if I want to put my steel mill right next to my corrupt police station, or loan shark, or elementary school, I can do it! Though the steel mill is an eyesore and makes all of the buildings around it less attractive to your Sims, you don't have to worry about any buildings actually changing—but rather, the way the Sims interact with them. While some of the gameplay push-backs still exist, they manifest themselves more overtly and allow you to better control how the city is made. *SimCity: Societies* is largely about exploration and discovery, about combining buildings in ways that *you* dream up. Traditional city-building games, by contrast, tend to be about adhering to one set solution.

GFW: *Societies* crawls when you crank the graphics settings to max—even on high-end rigs. Are performance issues a constant battle for *SimCity* games?

JF: While I'm not surprised that a large city at our highest settings brings any of today's PCs to their knees, *Societies* runs quite well on common machines and on less-than-maximum settings. It was a much bigger priority for us to make the game look great on a large sample of machines, rather than to perfect it on the high end. However, we still wanted to include more features for future machines, since city-building games tend to have very long shelf lives. From a technical standpoint, no other kinds of games out there have the same graphical presentation demands, simultaneously with hundreds of pathing calls, traffic/collision system, A.I. weighting and decisions, et cetera. So yes, city-building games have their own unique technical hurdles—it's tough, since card manufacturers tend to focus on stuff like *Crysis*—however, we are pleased with what we think will be the best-looking large-scale game ever played on a low- or mid-range system, even if this means we might have been ahead of our time with some of the high settings.

GFW: *Societies*' documentation mentions the game's ease of customization, but no editor's bundled with the game. Can you provide an example of how an average gamer could make some changes to their *Societies* experience? Are you guys planning on releasing any editing tools online postlaunch?

JF: We have some good instructions on the *SimCity* website, but I'll give you an example of what you can do out-of-the-box without any additional instructions: You can open the text file NewConstants.txt and change a tremendous amount of general settings for the game such as starting simoleans, properties of fire, traffic flow at lights and intersections, road drawing limitations, building placement limitations, et cetera. Beyond that, you can go to any individual building and change numerous attributes such as cost, actions, societal values, and prerequisites to unlock it. In addition to these quick and easy changes, you can modify behaviors in scripts or add your own height maps. There's so much to cover, but as I said, additional support for editing is on our website.

GFW: Any design decisions you're particularly happy or unhappy with?

JF: There sure are a lot of things for us to be proud of, considering how daunting some of the ideas initially seemed. A typical city-building game is usually about making one type of city in a very detailed manner that creates an immersive experience for the person playing. All of the buildings in these games conform to one very specific rule set related to building that type of city. To suddenly flip this upside down and make a compelling city-builder where a steel mill could communicate in gaming terms with a casino, monastery, dive bar, or arcade—that was our first challenge. We've made a game that lets you create a rugged contemplative society or a sprawling industrial society.

We're also very proud of the way the game flows for different types of gamers—from sandbox gamers who don't want goals to those who very much wish to choose a society and then follow goals. This happens naturally in the UI when you select filters about the types of societies you want to build, or if you strive for achievements that give you permanent rewards, or if you stick with the default filters and ignore the societies.

GFW: *Societies* seems like a pretty big step toward *SimCity*/*The Sims* integration. Is more of that coming? Might we perhaps be able to zoom in on specific Sims from our bohemian candy-land or dystopian future in a future *Sims* game?

JF: That really is a misconception. Please remember where the term "Sims" comes from. It was *SimCity* first—not the other way around. In *Societies*, you need to select your Sims in order to see what you are doing right or wrong in the city, but the game is not about naming and following a family around, it's about placing buildings and seeing how those affect your Sims. In essence, this has been true from day one; it's just better realized in *Societies*. You can zoom in on a Sim, track him, rename him, and find out why he is happy (or not). However, that's where it ends, and where we feel it should end. I want to be able to zoom in on a guy and find out if I can squeeze any more life out of him—making sure he is working and earning simoleans for me every day. I care about whether he's productive...not that he has a date or whether his aspirations are satisfied. That just works better as its own game, which *The Sims* has proven.

GFW: Where the heck is our monster disaster? Do you realize how many angry fans are going to picket your office because you didn't include a monster disaster? You've basically started World War III. Except with no option for a monster disaster.

JF: Well, you can't do everything the same way each time! Like many innovative titles, you need to focus on doing the new stuff really well and teaching the player how the game works—and not so much on bells and whistles. Sure, we would have liked to include a monster disaster or two, but the reality is, other stuff was more important for us to get right. We thought the Meteor Strike was a nice way of invoking massive destruction in a fairly innovative manner.

GFW: Are we ever going to see some sort of true multiplayer *SimCity* action, beyond the sharing of custom building sets and such? Did you guys entertain any such ideas?

JF: We always talk about multiplayer in city builders, and we have some experience with it in our prior development lives working on *Emperor* (back in our Impressions days), but we feel that messing around with each other is what makes multiplayer fun, which is better accomplished in a straight-up RTS or FPS. Why put four hours into building a city just so your buddy can sack it [in] 10 minutes? Instead, we thought that keeping the game accessible for customized content—and providing a website for exchanging of ideas and content—would be a better way to serve the community. ●**Ryan Scott**

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR X: ACCELERATION

Earns the original its wings

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Microsoft** GENRE: **Flight Simulation** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone 10+** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 4GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, *Microsoft Flight Simulator X* (joystick recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-6 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

Pop the catapult on the bow of a carrier and you can almost feel the Gs squeezing you back in your chair as *Microsoft Flight Simulator X: Acceleration*'s new F/A-18A Hornet roars off the flight deck, moving like a missile and spinning like a spaceship. You're flying low at 2,000 feet, sun at your back, nothing but tail and wings between blue sky and water—and then you come about and spy the carrier winking in the distance, four cables on its deck ready to snag your tailhook and stop you cold in just 300 hair-raising feet. If you can land on a dime, that is...and you'll almost have to.

ARMCHAIR ACROBATICS

But is it a game? A simulation? "Yes," says *Acceleration*, deftly straddling both. Whether you're tweaking launch bars and speed brakes or reacting to "waveoffs" and "bolters," nailing performance zones—not enemies—is the recreational lure in this fast-tempo expansion. Of course, you still earn your danger pay intercepting airborne security threats and contraband carriers—even chasing down a UFO in a high-altitude game of speed maneuvers against an extraterrestrial vessel cruising at up to 3,000 knots—but *Acceleration* draws the line shy of armaments like M61 Gatlings and ASRAAMs and cluster bombs.

Not that you need weapons here. *Acceleration* fills *Flight Simulator X*'s whirring blank spaces with chatty copilots and radio dispatchers—even occasional backseat passengers. In one mission, for instance, you're tasked with zipping the Secretary of Defense and his retinue around Edwards Air Force Base in a King Air 350. The catch? The weather's choppy and the secretary has a bad back—pull one too many Gs and he scuppers the tour. Or take another, where you fly the "vomit comet" (a Boeing B7-38) in roller-coaster parabolas designed to yield nearly half a minute of zero-G for your passengers, all without exceeding what seems a punitively low descent velocity. Get the hang of sling-loading crates with the new medium-lift EH-101 helicopter and you can try your luck hooking a vintage B-58 from the California desert—or, in a harrowing game of hover-and-adjust, rescue passengers from a sinking fishing ship in choppy Baltic waters.

RACE YOU TO RENO

If the F/A-18A offers power and the EH-101 carry-tactics, the third new aircraft—the venerable piston-driven P-51D Mustang—is pure speed. With its clipped wings boosting low-level maneuverability and trimming drag, it's a 3,000-horsepower beast, punching around pylons at the Reno racing school. Best of all: pulling off loops, tailslides, and "Cuban eights" in the 2006 Red Bull Tempelhof, Longleat, and Istanbul courses, or competing online in the new multiplayer racing mode with its acrobatic jousting, pylon-sprinting, and cross-country marathons.

Which, all told, makes *Acceleration* a no-brainer for *FSX* owners. And with the slipstreamed service release boosting performance dramatically (and the original down to $30), it's also a perfect reason for standbys to climb on board. ● **Matt Peckham**

VERDICT

- **Dozens of high-pressure missions; complex challenges for sim wonks.**
- **DX10 effects are negligible in Windows Vista—XP runs this one better.**

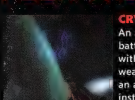
9/10

EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

FOLK WISDOM & TECH

More and more, developers are designing around the folk wisdom of centuries gone by. Take these recent boss battles, for example.



CRYSIS

An alien battleship armed with enough weapons to sink an aircraft carrier instead fires a dinky freeze-ray at a single soldier on deck...all while advertising its Achilles' heel. As the fourth-century aphorism has it, "If it flashes, turn it to ashes."

***GFW* SCORE: 8 OUT OF 10.**

JERICHO

A morbidly obese manbaby hangs from a meat hook vomiting blood on those beneath. Two gems from the 1794 *Farmers' Almanac* offer guidance here. "If the diaper doesn't fit, you must not s***." And, "O'Doul's nonalcoholic brew: When you want the belly but not the buzz."

***GFW* SCORE: 4 OUT OF 10.**

JERICHO

A disgusting, fat freak dangles on an industrial chain, spitting bile on anyone around. The 1871 *Spinsters' Compendium for Unmarried and Widowed Women, Third Edition*, says: "If Clive Barker scans his nut sack (and uses the JPG to texture villains in his sorry-ass shooter), you must attack."

***GFW* SCORE: 4 OUT OF 10.**

NEED FOR SPEED: PROSTREET

Street racing done right

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **EA Black Box** GENRE: **Racing** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Everyone 10+** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.8GHz CPU (3GHz in Windows Vista), 512MB RAM (1GB in Vista), 7.4GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard (gamepad/driving wheel recommended)** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

The *Need for Speed* franchise made its name on flash and pretty pictures and big-time licensing. It's never been a racing game so much as a driving *extravaganza*, its physics model always adequate—but never exemplary.

Meet the new *NFS*. You'll know it by the trail of dead that follows it.

NFS: ProStreet kills. EA Black Box eliminated all the cheesy "bad boy" periphery of previous installments, replacing it with a classy, witty, somewhat X Games–inspired presentation that doesn't limit you to midnight races or single manufacturers and doesn't force you to become a glorified battering ram. The racing environments, whether Southwest desert back road or purpose-built racetrack, are authentic and gritty and ridiculously interesting to drive. And *ProStreet*'s online component is so tightly integrated and so social that you may ultimately spend most of your time there—which is too bad, because the A.I. competition is absolutely top-notch.

But it's that wholly rebuilt, almost-a-sim physics engine that propels *ProStreet* to such heights. Tossing these weighty sedans and exotics around, knowing you're connected to the road by just four distinct contact points, then late-braking into a turn and riding the very limits of adhesion through it is ungodly fun—and darned challenging. Add a bevy of alternate modes (including thrilling drag and drift events, each with modified physics), a damage model that would make an auto wrecker proud, and a soundscape that just doesn't quit, and you have the pinnacle of *Need for Speed*–ism. ● **Gord Goble**

MEET THE NEW *NEED FOR SPEED*. YOU'LL KNOW IT BY THE TRAIL OF DEAD THAT FOLLOWS IT.

● **The aftermath of a major judgment error.**

VERDICT

+ **Exceptional driving model; excellent visuals; terrific online integration; oodles of modes and car types.**

– **No rearview mirrors; no replay feature.**

8/10

GOOD

Games for Windows

ONE PAD. TWO CHOICES.

With its unique Cyborg module, the new Cyborg Rumble Pad lets you rotate the left analog stick and d-pad and gives you something no other pad has: the freedom to choose how you'd like to move. Thumb up or Thumb down. Either way it's up to you. And with its dedicated FPS and precision buttons, everything quickly falls under your control so you can easily conquer whatever you're conquering.

- Unique Cyborg module allows the switching of the left analog stick and d-pad positions
- FPS button - instantly configure the pad for use in FPS games
- Precision button - with Precision mode enabled, aiming with the analog sticks becomes even easier
- 2 Quick Fire Shoulder Triggers
- 2 Analog Triggers
- 8-way d-pad
- 8 responsive buttons
- 2 analog joysticks
- Compatible with Windows® XP and Vista
- Fully programmable with SST Programming Software

CYBORG RUMBLE
GAMEPAD FOR PC

Saitek

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You'll probably utterly ignore the fanciful venues and wacky characters as you focus on the notes coming toward you.

GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK

It will rock you in a fashion not unlike a hurricane

PUBLISHER: **Aspyr Media** DEVELOPER: **Neversoft** GENRE: **Rhythm** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.8GHz CPU, 1GB RAM (2GB in Windows Vista), 6.1GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

You may be a guitar virtuoso. You may have never picked up a stringed instrument in your life. It doesn't matter—if you harbor any appreciation for rock music at all, you will find something in *Guitar Hero III* to like.

Understand that *Legends of Rock* doesn't stray far from the formula developed through the first two *Guitar Hero* games that made such a splash on the consoles: You tap colored buttons and strum along in time on a plastic, guitar-shaped USB controller as colored gems scroll down the screen. On the easiest difficulty levels, it's no sweat. But as the difficulty moves up, the licks get more complex, and you find yourself strumming two- and three-button chords, pounding out machine-gun strings of notes, and employing advanced techniques like hammer-ons and pull-offs (that is, fretting notes without strumming) as waves of notes rush at you.

Sure, this version introduces boss battles in which you trade licks and try to knock the other player out with special "attacks." Complete a specific string of notes and you can force your opponent to play at a higher difficulty, reverse the buttons onscreen, "break" one of their strings, and so on. It's a neat addition, but it's definitely no revolution.

A KILLER SET LIST

So is this just more of the same? In a manner of speaking, yes. But here's the thing: The song list is staggeringly awesome. Seriously. Whoever picks these songs deserves a friggin' award. Now, I'm not saying I love every song; I'd sooner gouge my own eyes out than willingly *listen* to White Zombie's "Black Sunshine" or Slipknot's "Before I Forget."

But even these songs are a blast to *play*. You can have just as much fun with Poison's notoriously simple "Talk Dirty to Me" as with DragonForce's absurdly tough "Through the Fire and Flames." If you ask me, that's an enormous feat.

A BROKEN STRING

I'm a little annoyed that some of the songs are available only in co-op mode. The no-frills online mode disappoints, too; it offers no chat options and no way for anyone but the host to even suggest a song. I'm also miffed that you can't practice the boss-battle tunes at all—or play them in any other context. This is particularly irritating given the insane challenge of the final battle; I'd finally master one tough section only to face a new, more difficult challenge and have to start over again.

I also find the system requirements a bit ridiculous; the game appears to legitimately need that kind of power, since having anything running in the background caused noticeable hitches and moments of slowdown, which—as you may imagine—are particularly irksome in this kind of game.

But overall? *Damn*, is this one fine game. If you've ever dreamed of shredding blistering licks in front of an adoring audience, you need to pick up *Guitar Hero III*. **Joe Rybicki**

VERDICT

- **Ridiculously great song list; even the weaker tunes are a blast to play.**
- **Some songs co-op only; can't practice boss battles; online mode's not too robust.**

9/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows

THESE DON'T ROCK

Only a few games in *CGW/GFW* history were bad enough to have earned our lowest possible rating. Here's the bottom of the barrel.

DUNGEON LORDS

Former *Wizardry* designer D.W. Bradley "lowered the bar" with this role-playing game that fought you every step of the way—removing quest items from your inventory, neglecting to open key portals, and being an atrociously buggy mess.

***CGW* SCORE: 0 OUT OF 5.**

MISTMARE

"Strategy First could have put a rotting dead rat in a shoebox and charged $20, and it still would have been a better value than *Mistmare*," wrote reviewer Jeff Green of a game that "seems to have been designed and programmed on an abacus."

***CGW* SCORE: 0 OUT OF 5.**

POSTAL 2

Of Running With Scissors' seminal *Postal 2*, reviewer Robert Coffey claimed, "Until someone boxes up syphilis and tries to sell it at retail, *Postal 2* is the worst product ever foisted upon consumers." We suppose syphilis is worse than a dead rat.

***CGW* SCORE: 0 OUT OF 5.**

SAM & MAX: EPISODE 2X01—ICE STATION SANTA

So this dog and this rabbit walk into Santa's workshop...

PUBLISHER: **GameTap/Telltale Games** DEVELOPER: **Telltale Games** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (http://snm.telltalegames.com)** ESRB RATING: **Not Rated**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.5GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 345MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

Obviously realizing that no adventure-game fan can have too much *Sam & Max* in his or her life, the funny folks at Telltale Games are busily crafting a second series of chaotic stories starring everyone's favorite unlicensed detectives. The dog-and-rabbit show's sophomore season kicks off with some sadistic holiday cheer, sending the freelance police to Santa's workshop with orders to cure jolly old Saint Nick's sudden case of the crazies. It seems Santa's outsourced his toymaking labor and locked himself up with a semiautomatic, leaving Sam and Max to save Christmas through an obligatory string of inventory puzzles and non sequitur jokes.

The guffaws roll in as frequently as ever—but at this point, that's a given. *Sam & Max*'s design crew runs a well-oiled humor machine, and *Ice Station Santa* flaunts everything from suicidal alley rats to demented gift exchanges to a trio of time-displaced Christmas spirits who turn the expected feel-good story cliché on its head. The pair's deadpan stylings still shine—and *Ice Station Santa*'s handful of offbeat puzzles still walk that tough tightrope between "insultingly simple" and "hopelessly frustrating." It's a rare case of a developer realizing what works...and not egotistically shattering it into a million pieces.

Speaking of which, *Season One*'s minor kinks get ironed out: Loading times are lessened, double-clicking now makes Sam sprint across lengthy scenes, Sam and Max's street corner's conveniently compacted (for reasons explained in the ridiculously random intro), and an adjustable hint system's been implemented for the truly brain-teased. For the *Sam & Max* faithful, Christmas arrives early. ● **Ryan Scott**

IT SEEMS SANTA'S OUTSOURCED HIS TOYMAKING LABOR AND LOCKED HIMSELF UP WITH A SEMIAUTOMATIC.

● **Torture-Me-Elmer is all the rage this year.**

VERDICT

- **Consistently funny story and jokes; minor *Season One* technical issues squashed.**
- **If you're not susceptible to non sequitur deadpan humor, this probably isn't your bag.**

8/10
GOOD
Games for Windows

REACH NEW HEIGHTS

NEW X52 PRO

The new **X52 Pro**, features a collection of meticulously refined features that not only deliver the most precise and dynamic flight control but also give you innovative tools for unlimited programmability and superior performance. Every detail from the improved iMFD display and heavy-duty military spec components to the intuitive controls and strong durable ergonomically designed body put you in command of the most realistic flying system. And with its gorgeous metal trims, dials and finishes, not only is the **X52 Pro** a vision of powerful beauty, it is also an advanced mechanical masterpiece that will take you to new heights.

Saitek

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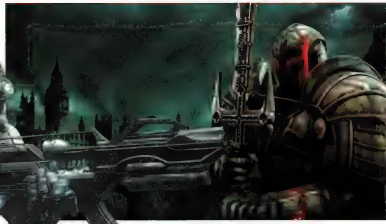
Unfortunately, Beefeater Chestguard is not the name of my character.



You'll visit this pocket of hell about 30 or 40 times.

HELLGATE: LONDON

It's not the end of the world

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Flagship Studios** GENRE: **Action-RPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.6GHz CPU, 1GB RAM (2GB in Windows Vista), 4GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **Live v1.0.32.4020**

REVIEW

You should have been a no-brainer. An action-RPG from an independent developer founded by the original creators of *Diablo*? A sci-fi postapocalyptic setting mixed with the supernatural? A 3D engine of randomized levels built around London's ruined landmarks? Demons and zombies and gnarled fleshy things called Hellmeats? Sign me up! Even the confused announcements about your special content for subscribers were intriguing. After all, with so much competition for online dollars, surely a publisher like EA and a group of veteran developers like the guys at Flagship Studios understand they must rise to the occasion. Surely they know that *World of WarCraft* is waiting on my desktop, just a few icons over. Surely, *Hellgate*, you'd be up to the task.

But you and I both know that you weren't ready. You feel like a beta. In fact, I played the beta, and I didn't see a heck of a lot of difference. You promised you'd change...and you didn't. So, now I'm sitting here with a legal pad full of notes about everything wrong. Many of my notes are a patch or three away from irrelevancy. But the larger problem is that you just don't get it. Yeah, sure, your character classes are distinct, each its own little game (and an even better game when played in a group—something you do your best to make difficult). But you don't go far enough with the skills, which are glib, unremarkable, and (due to a glaring lack of a re-spec option), a one-way trip down a tree of potentially bad choices.

I'M NOT MAD, I'M JUST DISAPPOINTED

You've given me moments of exhilarating sword-swinging and spell-slinging, perched at the verge of death but for a quickly quaffed antitoxin or a nick-of-time healing aura, helpfully suggested via context-sensitive Shift and Control keys. But for every minute of this, I had three minutes of postcrash rebooting past your seven (7!) splash screens, 10 minutes of slogging through an area I've already seen a hundred times before, and 12 minutes of sorting through the confetti mosaic that is your inventory screen. I admit I enjoyed the obtuse calculus of trying to figure out how to best dress my paper doll and mod my weapons, but why so user-hostile, *Hellgate*?

And this is the world you've created? Failed attempts at Monty Python–esque humor next to the leaden hell-on-Earth angst? Cut-scenes of nothing but a book? It's enough to make a guy pine for Generic Fantasy World No. 117. And the oppressive sameness of your levels! Does one tunnel turning right differ in any meaningful way from the same tunnel turning left? Why must you tease me with great English names like Moorgate, Puddle Dock, and Fenchurch when you're not going to do anything with them? We both know you're going to reuse the same monsters, but do you have to fling them around so carelessly? And did you think taking time out for those special missions was a good idea? A superficial RTS session? A tedious turret shootout? A puzzle-based boss battle? It's a slap in the face at the very end when you demonstrate some cool PVP capture-the-flag variations—minus the PVP.

IT'S NOT ME, IT'S YOU

I'm sorry to say this, but you're not a 10th the MMO you think you are. Faction grinding for subway-station reputation? Really? Your idea of crafting is cramming Zombot trash into my inventory for Halloween along with a dozen of those supposed "unique" flaming skull helmets, and now all this Guy Fawkes stuff for crafting toffee and potatoes that do...well, who knows what they do, since you can't be bothered to tell me. But really, *Hellgate*? This is what you're offering for $10 a month? Do you think you're cute, pretending that your competition isn't *Guild Wars*, which does what you do—but better, and without a monthly fee?

You're not all bad. Underneath the frustrating instability, behind the graceless chat window, and beyond the procession of NPC dialogue boxes, you tickled that deep primordial need to gather more stuff and get stronger. Loot and leveling are the essence of any RPG, and you're equipped to satisfy that jones. Now, if only you could straighten up the rest of your act, you might be more than a partner in whatever dysfunctional need you meet for those unfortunate players willing to put up with you. You might be an actual *good* game. But for now, get help. Patches, add-ons, reboots...whatever. If that happens, give me a call. ♦**Tom Chick**

VERDICT

- **The inherent appeal of an action-RPG.**
- **Everything else about the relationship.**

4/10

BAD

Games for Windows

HEARTBREAKERS

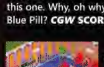
It's a fact of life: Sometimes, the big blockbuster game everyone's been waiting for simply doesn't live up to anyone's expectations. We wanted to love the following games—but they broke our hearts in the end.

VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES

We wanted *EverQuest* visionary Brad McQuaid's next big MMORPG to be great—instead, the game we got was buggy, boring, ugly as sin, missing some of the promised features that would set it apart, and quite clearly not ready for release. ***GFW* SCORE: 3 OUT OF 10.**

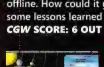
ENTER THE MATRIX

This *Matrix* spin-off should have been a no-brainer: It was overseen by the Wachowski brothers as a sort of experiment in multimedia storytelling—and what game could do bullet time better? Turns out: *not* this one. Why, oh why didn't we take the Blue Pill? ***CGW* SCORE: 2.5 OUT OF 5.**



THE SIMS ONLINE

Will Wright's venture into MMO space should have been electrifying—based on the most insanely popular PC series of all time, *The Sims* thrived on its community even when it was offline. How could it go wrong? Hopefully some lessons learned apply to *Spare*. ***CGW* SCORE: 6 OUT OF 10.**



MASTER OF ORION 3

One of the most clear-cut examples of the dangers of dumbing down (the game basically played itself), the third installment of the seminal *Master of Orion* series willfully abdicated its 4X space-strategy throne to *Galactic Civilizations II*. ***CGW* SCORE: 3 OUT OF 5.**

DAIKATANA

With his much-delayed first-person sworder, id Software cofounder John Romero proved he probably wasn't the reason for *Doom*'s success. Maybe we would have been more forgiving if John hadn't promised he'd make us his bitch. Such a tease. ***CGW* SCORE: 1.5 OUT OF 5.**

To string together combinations, you need to click the mouse at the exact moment the cursor changes to a flaming sword. This gets more difficult as the game goes on, but do it right and you'll be utterly devastating.

THE WITCHER

Definitely not the broom-riding kind

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **CD Projekt** GENRE: **Action-RPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.4GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 8.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

Fifteen minutes into *The Witcher*, I've diced up 30-plus people, defeated a 'roided-out insect-giant thingy, started my degree in alchemy, and shtupped a hot sorceress. Needless to say, I'm feeling pretty darn sanguine about the debut action-RPG from Polish developer CD Projekt. And then everything grinds to a halt.

THE SWITCHER

After the rollicking, unabashedly M-rated prologue, *The Witcher* abruptly changes gears, dumping you into a sleepy village with little but a vague set of far-off goals. Sure, you can handle some "Witcher's Work" (that is, quests) or play a couple of minigames, but it's a dog's age until you're back in the fast-paced, Action Jackson saddle again. In the interim, prepare to click through long (and inconsistently written and acted) dialogue trees, wander around the empty wilderness, and fight plenty of too-easy battles. Yeah, any game needs to switch up the pace a bit, but *The Witcher* goes from afterburner to hover too quickly and for too long. Moreover, frequent loading screens aggravate the game's protracted downtime—just entering a small cabin requires doing the "Please Wait" boogie for a good seven seconds. With so many separate locations, you have to wonder why CD Projekt chose to build *The Witcher* on BioWare's Aurora Engine (from *Neverwinter Nights*) rather than on, say, Gas Powered's completely loading-free *Dungeon Siege II* engine.

Still, *The Witcher* offers such a solid experience (and such a strong endgame) that it's worth contracting a minor case of twiddler's thumb. Combat, for example, is innovative and deep, yet surprisingly simple to learn. Stringing together combos is key. You do this by pressing your left mouse button at the appropriate time—press it too early and you'll break the chain; press it too late and you're open for a counter. You can also dodge by double-clicking on empty ground, switch fighting styles with the keyboard (crucial for dealing with different types of enemies), and throw spells with the right mouse button. Mix in a cornucopia of level-up abilities, realistic medieval fighting styles, and many funky pig-stickers, and you've got the most visceral RPG combat this side of late-night LARPing.

THE ENRICHER

But violence isn't everything, and *The Witcher* has much to recommend it outside of the combat system. Stuff like the eerie, compelling story (based on a popular series of Polish novels), the mature setting, a blood-pumping original score, and clever secondary game elements—especially the *Ultima*-inspired alchemy system.

What *The Witcher* doesn't offer: anything technologically new or interesting. The aforementioned Aurora Engine, even with all of CD Projekt's tweaks and mods, looks pretty Diet Pepsi compared to today's heavyweights. It's more than just an aesthetic issue: The lack of long-range view distance makes enemies appear and disappear unexpectedly, important items can be hard to spot, and spell effects seem to isolate one target but hit another.

Apart from the graphical foibles, *The Witcher* demonstrates the growing creative energy of European game designers, who continue to take chances with ever more innovative games, even as American developers obsess over the next *Halo*. **Eric Neigher**

VERDICT

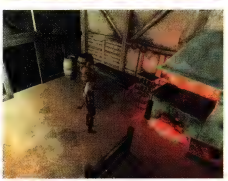
7/10

GOOD

Compelling story set in a well-realized world; innovative combat.

Too much downtime; bad acting; obsolete game engine doesn't offer much glitz.

Games for Windows



The world of *The Witcher* is decidedly dark fantasy. Racism against nonhumans is commonplace.

FURY

You'll love it for 10 minutes...maybe shorter

PUBLISHER: **Gamecock** DEVELOPER: **Auran** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail/Free Download (www.auran.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM (2GB in Windows Vista), 10GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

From EBgames.com: "*Fury* is a game that defies definition." Well, no. It's a fast-paced, PVP-only, battleground MMO. You've been waiting for this since, um, perhaps *Guild Wars*. Continue to wait. It's that really cool-looking new kid that you really, really want to like. The weird part, though, is that you *do* like it. But it gets old extremely quickly, especially if you decide to stick with the play-for-free deal (which seals away a ton of paid-only content).

Its three styles of battlegrounds look fabulous (if you don't take the minimum specs seriously—sure, it *runs*, but don't expect any of the glitter). One area is more beautiful than the next, but its shallow gameplay quickly masks the visual splendor. Most of your waiting time, which varies widely depending upon the day and time, is spent in an enormous multilevel lobby with alcoves, springing platforms, and seemingly 8 million attractively rendered but bored-looking and mostly superfluous NPCs.

Fury's skill and spell system is, in concept, really quite interesting. Each skill has a positive, negative, or null "charge" associated with it, making the combinations you choose strategically important...supposedly. It doesn't seem to work as intended, though. The 24-available-at-a-time skills, even when placed in a careful array, overlap and get somehow "lost," especially with lots of other players adding to the spell-spam. It's a messy button-masher that makes you really wish the developers had been able to realize its potential. Don't write it off completely, though...let's talk again in about six months. ● **Cindy Yans**

● **The actual play screen is a pretty messy affair.**

VERDICT

- **Breathtaking visuals; bite-sized gameplay sessions; innovative spell/skill system.**
- **Limited battlegrounds; king of button-mashers; play-for-free specs quite gimped.**

4/10
BAD
Games for Windows

FURY IS THAT REALLY COOL-LOOKING NEW KID THAT YOU REALLY, REALLY WANT TO LIKE.

LOKI: HEROES OF MYTHOLOGY

Grindhouse

PUBLISHER: **DreamCatcher Games** DEVELOPER: **Cyanide Studios** GENRE: **Action-RPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (www.steampowered.com)** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 7GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **2-6 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Retail Box**

REVIEW

The grinding in *Loki: Heroes of Mythology* is hypnotic. We first see it click repeatedly to kill all foes, get loot, move to next zone—in the *Diablo* series. And, at first, *Loki* recaptures that magic well enough: Once you start, you'll click through a zillion monsters, and suddenly it's three in the morning. Like *Titan Quest* and other contemporary iterations of the style, *Loki* is attractive and includes some good new ideas, especially in character customization and skill-growth. But it simply lacks the depth of more forward-thinking action-RPG alternatives, and "what *Diablo* did" just isn't enough anymore.

Choose a character from four distinct mythologies and click your way through your own culture's environment, and then move on to the others in a pan-mythological mission to combat the bad-kitty behavior of the evil god Seth. *Loki* features well-balanced quest-based loot and level progression, plus clever skill and item customization systems. Eventually, though, the hordes of monsters and A-to-B objective structure devolve into tedium. It doesn't help that you have to play through all three difficulty levels in order to see the *actual* ending.

The absence of a matching service hobbles the otherwise-fun cooperative multiplayer mode. The other three duel and team-versus-monster multiplayer modes are forgettable, lacking the mesmerizing, if monotonous, quality of the single-player game. Simply put, while it has few specific flaws, I can only recommend *Loki* to lovers of endless reward-based level grinding to the exclusion of all other play...and that market just ain't what it used to be. ● **Matthew Sakey**

● **Lesson learned: Do not call the giant Centaur King "Mr. Ed."**

VERDICT

- **Varied characters and customization options; good-sized campaign.**
- **Highly derivative; occasionally wonky controls; view is often obscured.**

4/10
BAD
Games for Windows

IT SIMPLY LACKS THE DEPTH OF MORE FORWARD-THINKING ACTION-RPG ALTERNATIVES.

REVIEWS WRAP-UP

The games that were too late (or too lame) to review in this issue

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 3

PUBLISHER: **Midway** DEVELOPER: **Epic Games** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 8GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-24 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

You might feel a touch of déjà vu but for the fancy new graphics. All your favorite stuff is back: The Biosludge Gun, the dune buggy with giant knives, the myriad game modes, the Mutators, and the insanely fast, over-the-top combat. And the thigh pads. Don't forget the thigh pads. But *Unreal Tournament 3* isn't just a sumptuous visual update and a bunch of exciting new maps. The weapons are tweaked, the vehicles are upgraded, and the new Warfare mode is a tightly packed ball of game types from *UT 2004*: a touch of Assault, a sprinkle of Onslaught, and a dash of Bombing Run. In other words, it's the new best way to get your *Unreal Tournament* fix. And say hello to your new Necris overlords with their creepy tentacled vehicles—part Doc Ock, part *War of the Worlds*. The line for the Darkwalker spawn point forms here. Check back next month for a full review.

TABULA RASA

PUBLISHER: **NCsoft** DEVELOPER: **NCsoft/Destination Games** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-Scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **Live v1.0.1.4**

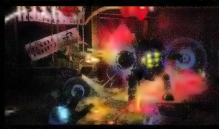
Tabula Rasa may look like an MMO/shooter hybrid, but think twice: Your success in gunning someone down depends entirely on dice rolls—not reflexes. With the exception of shotguns, which really do behave as cone hit-scan weapons, targeting has everything to do with sticky reticules, rendering the whole shooter aspect almost entirely aesthetic. Which is fine; the illusion of battlefield madness is pitch-perfect, even if you're not actually lining up headshots.

The game's most significant improvement over its peers is a cloning system, which allows complete duplication of a character before every major class decision, saving you the trouble of playing through the same content over and over again if you find yourself going down the wrong branch. This isn't an MMO that'll change the face of online gaming with its innovation, but it already holds a unique position as a satisfying *Starship Troopers*–looking sci-fi romp. It's still going through growing pains, though—servers lag at peak times, the auction house and in-game e-mail system remain nonexistent, and the crafting system's worse than useless. But that's what we expect of most MMOs at birth. More on this one next issue.

REVIEW INDEX

As part of our reviews blowout issue, here's a handy reference guide to every game *GFW*'s reviewed to date. Game names in yellow indicate *GFW* Editors' Choice award-winners.

GAME TITLE	SCORE	ISSUE
1701 A.D.	8	3
Agatha Christie: Murder on the Orient Express	2	3
Age of Empires III: The Asian Dynasties	9	13
Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs	9	1
Age of Pirates: Caribbean Tales	4	1
Ancient Wars: Sparta	5	8
ArchLord	4	3
ArmA: Combat Operations	6	8
Battlefield 2142	6	2
Battlestations: Midway	5	5



BioShock	10	11
Blazing Angels 2: Secret Missions of WWII	4	13
Blitzkrieg II: Fall of the Reich	5	6
Brigade E5: New Jagged Union	3	3
Caesar IV	5	1
Call of Juarez	8	9
Carriers at War	7	10
City Life: World Edition	8.5	6
Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword	9	10
Clive Barker's Jericho	4	13
Combat Mission: Shock Force	5	10
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	9	6
Company of Heroes	10	1
Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts	9	12
D.I.R.T.: Origin of the Species	5	3
Dark Messiah of Might and Magic	4	2
DEFCON	9	1
DiRT	7	10
Distant Guns: The Russo-Japanese War at Sea, 1904-05	7	2
Dungeon Runners	8	9
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	9	13
Europa Universalis III	9	4
Eve Online: Revelations	9	4
EverQuest II: Echoes of Faydwer	8	3
Evidence: The Last Ritual	4	3
F.E.A.R.: Extraction Point	7	2
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Faces of War	8	1
FIFA Soccer 07	8	2
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Flyboys Squadron	3	4
Forge of Freedom: The American Civil War 1861-1865	6	4
Galactic Assault: Prisoner of Power	6	12
Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar	9	6
Genesis Rising: The Universal Crusade	3	7
Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved	9	10

GAME TITLE	SCORE	ISSUE
Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter 2	7	10
Gothic 3	5	3
GTR 2	9	1
Guild Wars: Nightfall	9	2
Guild Wars: Eye of the North	6	12
Half-Life 2: Episode Two	10	12
Halo 2	6	9
Heroes of Annihilated Empires	5	3
Heroes of Might and Magic V: Hammers of Fate	6	3
IL-2 Sturmovik: 1946	10	7
Infernal	6	7
Jade Empire: Special Edition	7	5
Jaws Unleashed	1	2
Joint Task Force	3	1
King's Quest III: To Heir Is Human	7	1
Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	8	1
Lost Planet: Extreme Condition	5	10
Madden NFL 08	5	11
Maelstrom	6	5
Mage Knight: Apocalypse	5	1
Making History: The Calm & The Storm	6	7
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance	7	2
Medal of Honor: Airborne	7	11
Medieval II: Total War	8	2
Medieval II: Total War—Kingdoms	8	11
Microsoft Flight Simulator X	6	1
Myst Online: Uru Live	6	7
NBA Live 07	4	1
NBA Live 08	3	13
Need for Speed: Carbon	7	3
Neverwinter Nights 2	6	2
Neverwinter Nights 2: Mask of the Betrayer	8	12
NHL 07	5	1
NHL 08	5	11
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager 2007	7	2
Overlord	8	9
ParaWorld	5	1
Penumbra: Overture	5	8
Phantasy Star Universe	8	3
Portal	9	12
Race 07: The Official WTCC Game	8	12
Rainbow Six: Vegas	7.5	4
Reservoir Dogs	5	2
RoboBlitz	6	2
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	8	7
Sam & Max: Episode 1x01—Culture Shock	7	1
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Sam & Max: Episode 1x03—The Mole, the Mob, and the Meatball	7	5
Sam & Max: Episode 1x04—Abe Lincoln Must Die!	8	6
Sam & Max: Episode 1x05—Reality 2.0	7	7
Sam & Max: Episode 1x06—Bright Side of the Moon	8	8

GAME TITLE	SCORE	ISSUE
Scarface: The World Is Yours	6	2
Secret Files: Tunguska	5	3
Secrets of the Ark: A Broken Sword Game	7	6
Shadowrun	5	9
Sid Meier's Railroads!	7	2
Silent Hunter: Wolves of the Pacific	7	7
Silverfall	3	7
Space Empires V	5	3
Spider-Man 3	7	8
Splinter Cell: Double Agent	5	3
Star Trek: Legacy	5	4
Star Wars: Empire at War—Forces of Corruption	6	2
Stranglehold	6	12
Stronghold Legends	3	2
Supreme Commander	7	5
Sword of the New World: Granado Espada	4	11
Team Fortress 2	9	12
Test Drive Unlimited	8	7
The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles	8	7
The Guild 2	6	2
LOTR Online: Shadows of Angmar	9	8
LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth II—The Rise of the Witch-king	6	5
The Settlers: Rise of an Empire	5	13
The Shield	4	4
The Sierra Collections	4	1
The Sims 2: Pets	7	2
The Sims 2: Seasons	8	5
Theatre of War	4	8
ThreadSpace: Hyperbol	6	11
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 07	6	2
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 08	7.5	11

Titan Quest: Immortal Throne	9	5
Tomb Raider: Anniversary	8.5	9
Top Spin 2	6	7
TrackMania United	7	9
Two Worlds	6	12
Ultima Online: Kingdom Reborn	3	12
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	3	6
War Front: Turning Point	5	5
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Dark Crusade	8	1
Warhammer: Mark of Chaos	7	2
Whirlwind Over Vietnam	4	8
World in Conflict	8	11
World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade	10	5

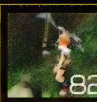
Extend

Where your games live on forever!

Tom resorts to using a Post-it Note to remind himself to save enough fuel every turn for his Xenoceptor air-to-air vehicles.

Saboteur Mata Boyd wreaks havoc on Tom's Xenopod base.

INSIDE



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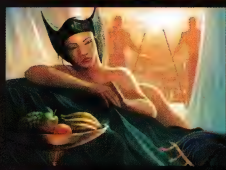
TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

ARMAGEDDON EMPIRES

Tom and Bruce fight over Earth in this great indie strategy game

PUBLISHER: **Cryptic Comet** DEVELOPER: **Cryptic Comet** GENRE: **Turn-based Strategy** ESRB RATING: **Teen**



COLUMN

Tom Chick

Prominent freelance videogame critic Tom Chick also runs popular website QuarterToThree.com.

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW's* resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

TOM: I was all set to roll over Bruce in some real-time strategy game this month. Perhaps the *Asian Dynasties* expansion for *Age of Empires III* or maybe *Universe at War*. But then Bruce suggested an indie turn-based game with lots of brown hexes. Ha ha. That guy can be such a joker. But a funny thing happened on the way to the latest triple-A title. The game Bruce recommended turned out to be pretty swell. It's called *Armageddon Empires*, which sounds awfully generic until you realize it is indeed about empires fighting over a post-Armageddon Earth. What other name are you going to give such a game?

BRUCE: Tom seems to think that *Armageddon Empires* developer Vic Davis had some sort of choice when it came to the content of *Armageddon Empires*. The fact is, when you are trying to closely simulate actual events, you can't just go around making stuff up. I have not done extensive research into what actually happened when two alien races fought over the Earth. My only expertise is what happened when two races of *dragons* fought over the Earth, aided by ancient samurai warriors. There was a Korean movie documentary about this recently. But I am told that the decision to include four different but balanced factions comes down to the fact that *this is how it actually was*. Nobody blamed *WarCraft's* developers for the fact that Frost Shock was overpowered—that's simply what was known about the historical shaman capabilities at that time. When further research revealed that, no, Frost Shock wasn't actually as powerful as previously believed, Blizzard nerfed it to reduce it to a more realistic level. So keep that in mind when you're playing *Armageddon Empires*.

TOM: We'll play on a normal-sized map, each of us trying to conquer the Empire of Man. Bruce will play the Machine Empire: cold, ruthless, unfeeling, neoconservative. I will play the Xenopods: hungry, intelligent, misunderstood. I'm not sure what our backstories are. There's a page about that in the front of the manual, but I can't be bothered to read it. I'm too busy playing.

BRUCE: When you buy this game (and you absolutely should if you like turn-based strategy), you'll want to refer to the tutorial on Bill Harris' blog (http://dubiousquality.blogspot.com). Also, feel free to write in to *Games for Windows* about Tom's gratuitous political slam in the previous paragraph.

TOM: I construct a deck based on getting a geneticist or scientist into play early on. These guys can make biological enhancements and high-tech equipment unique to their race. So I seed my deck with heroes from the "Intellects of the Hive" category. I'll also need some Research Nests where they'll work. The Xenopods need lots of human resources—and I don't mean the kind that make you go to training seminars—so I bring along Brood Pens, and I take with my starting tiles three Shanty Towns where I can build Feeding Pens.

BRUCE: Leave it to Tom to change the rules and construct a deck instead of using the starter decks that come with the game. Not satisfied with James Watson's sullying the reputation of geneticists, Tom has to go and enlist them to aid the research of an alien army of postapocalyptic invaders. I wonder what Francis Crick would think of that.

TOM: I can't help it. As a collectible card game addict, I cannot keep my fingers out of deck building. I simply can't do it. It's like asking the cast of *Lost* to not drive while drunk.

BRUCE, TURN 6: I've sent out a bunch of recon robots, which unfortunately haven't found much in the way of resources. The nice thing about the robot faction is that it doesn't need human resources, because I mean...duh, they're robots. This is the kind of careful attention to historical detail that you have to include if you're making a simulation and not just a game.

TOM, TURN 7: I got a Research Nest in my opening hand. It can't be long before a scientist or geneticist follows. I've played four Xenopod Larvae so far, which will be hatched into random units when I can afford the human resources. M'sisilk, a stealth scouting hero, is exploring the wastelands for special locations to the east. R'lyah, a powerful general, is exploring to the west. Let's be careful out there, guys.

BRUCE, TURN 15: I have a bunch of heroes in my hand, which doesn't do me much good since they are all tactical geniuses and I only have one real army going.

TOM, TURN 17: M'sisilk stumbled across two choice locations on the eastern edge of the map, just two hexes away from each other. The Camps are occupied by three cannibal armies who can be kicked out easily enough so I can get to the rich human resources below. The Wilderness Shrine, which automatically generates two human resources, is held by the Blue Jade Princess with an army of monks and a Merc Tank. So this is where all the food is! I've just "liberated" the Camps from their >

cannibal overlords, although we plan to continue eating the people who live there. How's that for a regime change? Once the Destroyer arrives, I'll "liberate" the Wilderness Shrine from the Blue Jade Princess.

BRUCE, TURN 18: It's illustrative of Tom's hubris that he calls his Xenopods "liberators" when historically they were clearly occupiers. Tom has no sense of historical irony.

TOM, TURN 18: Puttering around in the west, R'lyah discovers a pair of Tentacle Beasts in the rich Crotan Wastes, which produce materials, energy, and tech. I'll build a Sub Hive out here to extend my supply range. Then R'lyah will return with an army to give these toxic Tentacle Beasts the boot.

BRUCE, TURN 19: I can't build any more outposts because I don't have any in my hand. I do have some airpower cards, which represent the historical ability of empires from Armageddon times to deploy weapons in space. I use one to knock off a human recon unit that was getting a little close to my base I still haven't expanded very much, which means I'm behind on the resources race.

TOM, TURN 21: The dice love me! A Xenopod Larva at the Fortress Hive hatches into a Monstrosity, which is the most powerful creature that can emerge. Now if only the cards would show a little love by dealing me a scientist to work in my unoccupied Research Nest. On the eastern front, an army led by Ptah is reinforced by a Destroyer biomecha, which just hunted down some Imperial Commandos who were running around blowing up my Feed Pens. Ptah and company roll into the Wilderness Shrine. Unfortunately, the Blue Jade Princess is killed instead of captured (captured heroes give you extra action points). But with the Camps and the Wilderness Shrine in my hands/tentacles/claws, it's like an all-you-can-eat buffet out here. I'm even spending human resources to improve my initiative die roll. Whee, humans all around, on me! Bon appétit!

BRUCE, TURN 21: Did you ever see that *Twilight Zone* episode where the aliens come to Earth and act all friendly and have a book called *To Serve Man* and then some guy shouts "It's a cookbook!" and their dastardly plans are revealed but it doesn't matter because they're all-powerful aliens? This is how I feel about the dramatic imbalance in the factions in this game.

TOM, TURN 22: Hello, Tsathogg, master scientist and technologist! Where have you been all my game? I immediately put him to work. Unfortunately, an Imperial saboteur named Mata Boyd is sniffing around, blowing up stuff at my HQ, and knocking over Feed Pens. The drawback of building a deck with a Fortress Hive situated in the dense urban terrain of New Ptath, a ruined city tile, is that it makes it easier for saboteurs to hide. Why couldn't the Empire of Men have just sent a regular army?

BRUCE, TURN 23: I have a nice little force led by Maledictus—which sounds totally badass—composed of a Leviathan, two Styxxes (Styxxi?), two Skeletors, and a Harpy. That sounds like it could be an army in *Heroes of Might and Magic*.

TOM, TURN 24: Fortunately, my Xenopod names are inspired by the works of H.P. Lovecraft and sound much more imposing than Bruce's Machine Empire names. Skeletor? Really? How embarrassing. I will, however, give him Maledictus. Why can't I have a Maledictus? M'sisilk discovers the Imperial Citadel to the east, several hexes north of the Wilderness Shrine and Camps, tucked behind some really tough terrain. If I conquer this, I win. Ptah's army, even with its Destroyer biomecha, probably isn't enough to take it yet. So he'll sit tight and defend my food supply. R'lyah and my Monstrosity will take the Crotan Wastes. This will give Tsathogg the tech he needs to build Xenopod toys like the Plasma Blossom missile and the Remote Viewer that gives me recon over the entire map.

BRUCE, TURN 26: On this map, I'm in the lower left, and the Empire of Man is in the upper right. They have a big army led by a hero operating in the center, while I pick off individual recon units. I suspect there is going to be a big showdown battle coming up, just like in the movies!

TOM, TURN 30: Hey! A Sub Hive I've built in the center of the map is seized by a recon tank and two squads of the Emperor's Own, fanatical infantry who can burn their own hit points to inflict extra damage. I don't have very good recon out here, and I was so intent on guarding the Wilderness Shrine that I didn't see them coming. Ptah's army kicks them out, thanks in no small part to the Destroyer biomecha. I love that little guy. He shuts down any unit he successfully attacks and he has a built-in 150 percent damage multiplier. I think I'll name him Maledictus.

BRUCE, TURN 33: I captured a Strange Gate! That's exactly what it says. It's located in the Klendathu Desert, which I believe is something from *Starship Troopers*. Not that I know that offhand—I think I heard it last week on NPR.

TOM, TURN 36: Bruce is doing well with the ruins. I'll trade a Crotan Waste, where I'm collecting tech resources and cubes of fried bread, for a Strange Gate or a Klendathu Desert any day. But once I conquer these Imperials, I'll rule the world and assign whatever names I want. The Imperials cross the mountains from their Citadel with a force of infantry backed by Cheetah support vehicles. I beat them back with Ptah's army, which has been switched over to S'luggha, a general who makes them more mobile by increasing their speed and reducing the action-point cost to move them. Unfortunately, the Imperial leader Adam Wraith escapes outside my supply range. I need some way to extend my supply.

BRUCE, TURN 37: Speaking of supply, I have a material resource just one hex out of my supply range. I want to put an outpost there, but you cannot place outposts out of supply. I wish there were a way to extend my supply range....

TOM, TURN 40: I draw Ithaq, a logistics genius and efficiency expert who adds two hexes to my supply range. That's just enough to get me over the mountains and into the Imperial Citadel. Empire of Men, here I come. S'luggha is poised to strike from the south, and R'lyah is on his way from the west. We're going to have a Man sandwich. Wait, does that sound gay?

BRUCE, TURN 40: OK, I guess I could have used my logistics expert. Wait, I have one! Oh, yeah—he/she needs to be in the faction HQ. Stupid rules!

TOM, TURN 42: To take advantage of R'lyah's combat bonus, I assemble all my units under his leadership and park south of the Imperial Citadel. This lures the Imperial forces from the Citadel into the adjacent mountains, under the command of a raider named Winston Liu. I've got a slight strength advantage, but he's hunkered down in the mountains, smack-dab between my army and his Citadel. We exchange airstrikes, with his JSF IIs blowing past my Xenoceptors, and my Pod Hoverships dropping a few Tsathogg-built Plasma Blossoms on him. We're reluctant to commit to full-scale attacks, so it's a standoff.

BRUCE, TURN 42: My recon just spotted Winston Liu here, too! He's everywhere. I hit him with some airstrikes to whittle him down, and then defeat him with my überstack. It's going to take a few more turns to finish off the Empire of Man, though.

TOM, TURN 43: I sneak a Gangrel commando squad into the mountains. They call in a force of Drones who can deploy into the field. The small force moves into the Citadel, where they fight a pitched battle against Imperial Grenadiers and infantry. It takes forever, with my Drones slaughtered and my Gangrels knocked down to a single hit point. Eventually the Grenadiers face off against a Cheetah vehicle and Winston Liu, with the Cheetah's weak gun unable to penetrate the Gangrel defense. The vehicle's finally destroyed, and since the Gangrels are commandos, they manage to capture Winston Liu. The Imperial Citadel falls. This puts the main Imperial army out of supply, reducing their strength considerably. R'lyah moves into the mountains and handily destroys them. I beat the Empire of Man on the 43rd turn with a score of 269 points and immediately instruct all the inhabitants of Earth to report to the nearest Feeding Pens, where I will serve Man.

BRUCE, TURN 55: I ended up playing the game out, and won in Turn 55 with 216 points. I guess that's a lesson to aspiring *Armageddon Empires* players: It's as important to build as to receive. Decks, that is.

Tom's aptly named Destroyer destroys some Imperial Ranger commandos.

WINNER: TOM

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CRISIS ON INFINITE SE

Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape

Horses are overly curious about just how their barding is forged.

THIS MONTH:

HEAVY METAL

COLUMN

Cindy Yans

Cindy's got a bank full of Brass Halberds of Lameness that she'd be happy to sell you for dirt cheap.

Not very long ago, while working at my desk, I was trying to ignore the tingling and numbness I've had in my hand and wrist for the past few months. I decided to do some research; upon visiting www.neurological_disorders_at_your_fingertips.com, I discovered the following:

"Scenario: You're working at your desk, trying to ignore the tingling and numbness in your hand and wrist."

Check.

"Suddenly, a sharp, piercing pain shoots through the wrist and up your arm."

Check.

"Just a passing cramp?"

Holy crap, I hope so.

"More likely, you have carpal tunnel syndrome—a painful progressive condition caused by compression of a key nerve in the wrist."

Uh-oh. Isn't that a common disorder caused by Advanced Mousal Abuse? I've been happily mous-

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

Unlike some other independent games, ***Armageddon Empires*** does not skimp on artwork.

This column is usually about war games, but I find that lots of war gamers appreciate good turn-based strategy games. Since these are becoming scarce nowadays, I want to highlight a real gem that slipped under the radar this past summer.

Cryptic Comet is a one-man show run by Vic Davis. The company's first game is *Armageddon Empires*—a hybrid in terms of game mechanics, combining the best aspects of collectible card games and board game–like strategy offerings. The cards are all included, though, so you don't have to buy booster packs. The game's got a lot of replayability, because different decks can dramatically change your play style.

After some kind of Armageddon (hence the name), four factions battle it out for control of a devastated Earth. Cards in your hand become units on the hex map, while movement and combat are a clever combination of resources, dice, and action points. The need to carefully select your actions, plan ahead, and build up armies and resource networks should appeal to computer-strategy fans and board game players alike. The game is for solo play only, but the A.I. is reasonably challenging; the game's subtleties will take players some time to appreciate.

Cryptic Comet self-publishes for the time being, as Davis wants to "build up a reputation for turn-based strategy/computer board games like Spiderweb [Software] has for old-school RPGs." He hopes to get another game done in under 18 months while also releasing "a free mini-upgrade next year that adds some more indie cards and 'fun' faction cards" to *Armageddon Empires*.

You can find a demo version of the game, as well as the manual, from Cryptic Comet's website (www.crypticcomet.com). It's a $29.95 downloadable purchase, if you decide to spring for the whole thing. ●

RVERS

ing and keyboarding forever and ever, though. So...why now?

One week later at the neurologist: "So," said Dr. Painful_Tendinitis, "you spend time on a bunch of crappy websites and have come to the conclusion that you're suffering from CTS?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Well, OK, let's see...are you a tennis player, grocery bagger, or meat, poultry, or fish packer?"

"Nada."

"Do you regularly use any vibration tools or heavy machinery?"

"Vibration tools, mmmm...uh, no, never mind."

"Combine materials to construct top-quality imbued adamantium breastplates?"

Oh, no. That's it! Crafting. Why did I suddenly take up MMO tradeskills?

Dr. P noted my guilty look. "*Crafting*?" he exclaimed. "That carpal tunnel breeding ground? What were you thinking?" He shook his head disappointedly and noted, "As the nerve is compressed, certain changes begin to take place that include both direct morphological changes in the nerve fibers as well as ischemic changes...." My eyes glazed over.

Until recently, my experiences with tradeskills consisted of "Gee, wouldn't it be nice if I could make armor and weapons—not only for myself, but for my beloved guildmates [gag]?" I'd then

Blood Elf gathers rocks and lox.

Moppsy the Rat, a finalist on *Top Cook*, causes *quite* a stir.

go through the motions to become a proficient tinker, tailor, brewer, butcher, baker, optician, silversmith, whatever. After about 10 minutes, I generally fell asleep. Upon waking, what I *really* wanted was to resume normal MMO activities—like harassing incompetents and PK'ing newbies.

What is it, though, about this crafting thing? Do we want to "make a difference in the game world?" Do we want "a reason to 'create' instead of 'destroy'?" These games are supposedly about community...and if that's the case, you need a reason to interact, right? But what really happens is that all transactions take place within a consignment system where buyer and seller never actually come into contact. Also, everywhere you look, people employ illegal macros in order to accomplish these tasks *in absentia* (or they're utilizing powerleveling services that advertise stuff like "Level while sleeping with our macros [sic]"). Currency farms invite you to spend real cash on in-game currency, and they're *everywhere*.

They eliminate the need for you to *do* anything, really—leaving you plenty of time to have fun, which means...what, exactly?

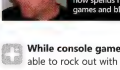
I persisted with the crafting, though, as an "exercise." Gather resources. Click, click, click. Purchase reagents. Click, click. Combine and make the same "practice item" over and over and over again. Click, click, double-click, click. Ta-da! "You have made a Tin Dagger of Humiliation." Oh, yeah! Let's do it again. With enough time and caffeine, I eventually graduated to "You have made a Brass Halberd of Lameness." Much better. Gee, maybe some guild will appoint me Grandmaster Craftsman, and while the others go hunting and adventuring, I can sit by the anvil and...click. I revived as Dr. *P* continued. "Usually the smallest-diameter, unmyelinated fibers are affected first," he explained. "These are followed by larger myelinated sensory fibers, and finally by myelinated motor fibers...."

Scary? Sure. But worth it...um, right?

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN



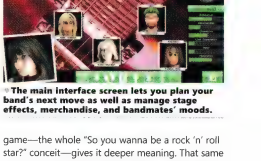
Robert Coffey

Former *CGW* editor Robert Coffey now spends his days playing word games and block puzzles. What a life!

While console gamers have long been able to rock out with their, uh, roosters out courtesy of the *Guitar Hero* games, PC gamers with a longing for musical play always settled for whatever meager melodic delight could be wrung from the anemic harmonic-convergence puzzles of *Myst* and its ilk. Somehow, twiddling bedewed levers in order to toot distant steam-powered horns in a lush forest of fern doesn't quite scratch that Monsters of Rock itch.

Finally, PC rock gamers enjoy a *real* option (well, *other* than *Guitar Hero III*), and while it might be more *Band Manager Hero* than *Guitar Hero*, it's a good and surprisingly engaging diversion. Within minutes of downloading *Kudos Rock Legend*, I was auditioning additional band members for my art-punk creation, Mondegren. During our five-year career, we clawed our way to the top—composing our own songs (hits like "Scuse Me While I Kiss This Guy," "Secret Asian Man," and "Arliss the Seal"), relentlessly rehearsing, and trying to placate our whiny-ass drummer with a top-of-the-line drum set, only to have him quit the band and take the gear.

Kudos Rock Legend succeeds almost in spite of itself. The game includes lots of money management (you have to pay for rehearsal space, stage effects, new instruments, etc.) and time management (you can only perform one action per day, so you need to strategize well); none of this content is especially innovative, but the overall fiction of the game—the whole "So you wanna be a rock 'n' roll star?" conceit—gives it deeper meaning. That same conceit drives the simple minigames, making them more engaging than they probably should be. Curiously, for a music game, it's got an especially abysmal soundtrack...and some design decisions seem geared to prolong (but not enhance) play. Still, I still find myself playing for long stretches of time, and it's just $20 at BigFishGames.com.



The main interface screen lets you plan your band's next move as well as manage stage effects, merchandise, and bandmates' moods.

SOUND OFF

Things you might hear on the GFW Radio podcast

ROUND TABLE

XTRAS

GFW RADIO

Games for Windows

THE CREW

Got podcast comments? Hit the GFW message boards at boards.1UP.com, or send us feedback via e-mail at gfwletters@ziffdavis.com.

Jeff Green
Editor-in-chief

Sean Molloy
Managing editor

Darren Gladstone
Senior editor

Ryan Scott
Editor

Shawn Elliott
Editor

Every week, the editors of *GFW* toss aside their inhibitions on *GFW Radio*, a podcast (it's like a magazine, only talked!) dedicated to what we love and loathe in the computer-gaming world. Subscribe at podcasts.1UP.com or the all-powerful iTunes Music Store. Want a sample of the hijinks? Here's a conversation around the office inspired by this month's reviews-themed issue of *GFW*.

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: What's the best game you've ever had the privilege of reviewing?

SEAN: That question is stupid, and the answer is something boring like *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* or *BioShock* anyway, so I'm going to tell you instead about the *worst* game I ever reviewed. It was a shooter called *Target Earth* for the Sega Genesis. I believe I gave it 1 asterisk in my Sean's Genesis *Leveling Library* reader, a 50-page dot-matrix printout that served as the essential tome of our neighborhood game-exchange program when I was 14. I believe I called it "harder than the worst math test you can imagine," and I stand by that statement today.

RYAN: Back when I was a clueless, antisocial retail drone—that's before I became a clueless, anti-social magazine editor—I wrote a bunch of reader reviews for GameSpot. And, to pimp in on Sean's shameless hijacking of the topic at hand, a lot of the games in question were pretty bad. Like, say, Batman: Dark Tomorrow for the GameCube, where you ran around Gotham as a tanned-stiff Batman and spent most of your time getting disoriented by *Resident Evil*–style geographic logic—exit one area, arrive on the next screen in an entirely different position than you'd reasonably expect—and trying to figure out why your Bat-punches and Bat-kicks didn't always work right. Here's a fun review quote that in no way reveals my relative editorial ignorance at the time: "*Dark Tomorrow* certainly could have used a whole lot more polish."

DARREN: What the hell's wrong with me that I actually enjoy playing crap games? With plenty of "good" candidates for wretchedness lately, it's hard to pick just one. A favorite, though, has got to be *Breed*. It was some FPS *Starship Troopers* rip-off with horrible voice acting—which can be fun in its own right—and inbred A.I. Seeing my elite brigade run off cliffs—no joke—was nothing compared to the *Trainers*-like wormholes around the world, which I'd like to think aren't bugs.

SEAN: I can enjoy crap games too, provided some kernel of nonsoap hides beneath. Those are the games you can't admit to liking. You just play them by yourself in the dark, and maybe you find a secret group of people who wear red handkerchiefs in their jeans pocket so you can nod to each other on the street as if to say "you are not alone." There are special clubs where you can meet these people, too, like that vampire rave from *Blade*, or the British Museum level in *Hellgate: London*.

JEFF: Weren't we supposed to talk about the best game we ever reviewed? Not one of you has answered the question yet! You're all fired! So let me lead by example. Because I have worked here for approximately 100 years now, I have had the privilege of reviewing many great games from our glorious past. *Fallout*. *No One Lives Forever*. *Sanitarium*. *Half-Life*. It's hard to just pick just one, 'cuz they're all so great. Wow. Who wants to hug?

DARREN: Oh, that's fun, Jeff. Talk about the good games. What's the first thing you reviewed? First?

SEAN: Five has some fantastic emergent game-play. And *Fallout* and *Sanitarium* were both great, whatever. Hey, speaking of reviews, has anyone else noticed how review scores on aggro-gator sites like GameRankings seem so lower themselves over time? Like, the first reviews for games are all super excited, then the later ones trickle in and they're like "meh," and then the last few are all like "*Screw BioShock*." Seems like every hot new release somehow ranks high enough to make it "one of the top 10 games of all time" for about 4 minutes.

JEFF: *Screw BioShock*. Wait...didn't we give that a 10?

In this issue's *Lego Batman* preview, we talked about many bad *Batman* games. This is one of 'em.

ADVERTISER INDEX

Maximize Your PC's Power

Upgrading is a cinch with NVIDIA's SLI technology

Ask yourself: Has this happened to me?

You're all excited about the latest batch of DirectX® 10–powered games. But when you finally boot one on your PC, what you see on your monitor doesn't look like the game's trailer or demo screenshots. And if it does, you find that performance slows to a crawl.

The catch is this—if you don't have a system capable of quickly rendering the latest DirectX 10–enhanced effects like flames, smoke, and haze, you may not be able to achieve the visual performance and screen resolutions that you need to enjoy the game the way it's meant to be played.

So what to do? Your best choice is to upgrade your PC's graphics subsystem. DirectX 10 requires a next-generation GPU (graphics processing unit) like the NVIDIA® GeForce® 8 Series.

If enhancing your system's graphics capabilities is in your future, you should also think about incorporating dual GeForce 8 Series cards with NVIDIA SLI™ technology. SLI maxes out the graphics quality and performance of your PC, delivering intense and realistic DirectX 10 graphics without hiccups, stalls, or performance-based artifacts. And better yet, making the jump to SLI is easier and less expensive than you think.

Scene from *World in Conflict* (VU Games, Rated: T, Blood, Language, Violence) from Massive Entertainment rendered with NVIDIA GeForce SLI graphics.

***BioShock* (2K Games, Rated: M, Blood and Gore, Drug Reference, Intense Violence, Sexual Themes, Strong Language) runs up to 66 percent faster on NVIDIA SLI than on a single-GPU system.**

WHAT IS SLI?

SLI technology harnesses the power of multiple NVIDIA graphics cards to give you the best PC gaming experience available, letting you play at extreme high-def resolutions.

Powered by two or more NVIDIA GeForce GPUs on an SLI-ready NVIDIA nForce® motherboard, SLI splits the rendering of frames between two (or more) graphics cards, which can effectively double the performance of certain games (although 50 percent to 75 percent gains are more common). For example, in *World in Conflict*, SLI boosts performance of GeForce 8600 GTS cards by 71 percent. And *BioShock*™ runs 66 percent faster with SLI over a single-card GeForce 8800 GTS system.

If you play at extreme resolutions, SLI is definitely for you. SLI can generate full-quality images at resolutions up to 2560x1600 for a gaming experience that goes beyond high-def. There are no compromises with SLI; just crank up the graphics options and enjoy.

Best of all, SLI is easy to use. It handles all general system and game management, letting you focus instead on what matters most: the onscreen action.

BUT ISN'T SLI EXPENSIVE?

Not necessarily. Sure, you can spend thousands of dollars on an ultra-high-end SLI rig. But you can also get complete pre-built SLI systems for under $999. And if you're willing to build your own from components, it can cost even less. There's an SLI system to fit every budget.

One cost-saving strategy is to buy an SLI-ready machine, but install only one GeForce 8 Series card. This should run current DirectX 10 games just fine, particularly if you don't use a high-resolution monitor. But a year from now, when the newest games are running more sluggishly, you can add a second graphics card. You'll instantly see a 50 percent to 100 percent boost in gaming performance without breaking the bank—and turn your PC into a gaming monster.

HOW TO GET SLI

NVIDIA has set up an SLI website (www.slizone.com) for you to learn more about SLI. SLI Zone also gives you tools to spec out and shop for SLI-certified systems and components, both new and used.

Pre-configured SLI and SLI-ready desktop/notebook systems are available for purchase. Or you can spec out and build your own SLI rig using NVIDIA-certified components. The website also has "how-to" guides that help you choose components and explain how to build a system. And if you already have an SLI rig, you can join NVIDIA's Club SLI and receive exclusive benefits.

So what are you waiting for?

Get ready. Get SLI. And get prepared to bring it.

THE OFFICIAL WORD
Games for Windows

Gaming on

Dell and Alienware delivering the ultimate in mobile PCs

Alienware Area-51 m17x coming soon. For more information, visit: www.alienware.com/declassified.

If anyone needs proof that Moore's Law is still going strong, look no further than today's mobile gaming platforms.

After all...not so long ago, any fan of Games for Windows®–branded titles out to decimate their opponents wouldn't dream of showing up to the latest LAN party with a notebook system, specially kitted "gaming model" or not.

Why? High-end gaming rigs should feature, at a minimum, top-of-the-line processors that support overclocking, fast system memory, and high-performance multi-GPU solutions like ATI's CrossFire™ or NVIDIA®'s SLI™ technologies. What's more, in the never-ending quest to eke out even better gaming performance, today's premier systems typically include dual hard drives configured in RAID striping arrays and function-specific components like physics processor units (PPUs).

That's a lot of technology for a desktop chassis, let alone a system trying to cram similar specs into a notebook form factor—but thankfully, it's finally been done. Today's gaming laptops are purpose-built, featuring the same high-performance technology found in most gaming desktops and providing gamers a fully immersive gaming experience without compromise, no matter where their travels take them. And with the introduction of built-in mobile broadband connectivity via wireless carriers, gamers can now tag in to online games wherever they get cell phone coverage as well.

Two pioneering PC companies are leading the charge in bringing high-performance gaming notebooks to market: Alienware and Dell. And like today's high-end laptop systems, these two bellwethers continue to push the envelope in terms of delivering the best mobile gaming experience available.

ALIENWARE—LEADING THE WAY

Alienware's history is full of industry firsts, especially when it comes to PC gaming and high-performance computing. As one of the first players in the PC gaming industry, Alienware helped create the high-performance gaming space, becoming a leader in product innovation and customer service.

Fast-forward to today: As industry interest in PC gaming and high-performance computing continues to grow exponentially, mobile gaming is reaching new heights. With the help of the DirectX® 10 graphics technology in Windows Vista®, DirectX 10–compatible graphics cards, and powerful dual-core mobile processors, gaming notebooks are quickly closing the performance gap with their desktop siblings and are surpassing them in portability and convenience.

By incorporating these groundbreaking technologies, Alienware introduced two new notebooks to the PC gaming market in November 2007. The new Area-51 m15x and Area-51 m17x are both designed and engineered from the ground up for high-end gaming performance, with every detail (from motherboard layout for optimal cooling to external design features) expertly implemented by Alienware engineers.

THE PERFECT BLEND OF FORM AND FUNCTION

With the Area-51 m15x, Alienware brings the PC gaming industry another first by being the first 15.4-inch notebook to incorporate NVIDIA GeForce® 8800M GTX graphics. This feat makes the Area-51 m15x more powerful than most 17-inch notebooks available—and faster than every other 15.4-inch notebook on the market.

As a result, Area-51 m15x users can experience blazing frame rates and outstanding image quality with DirectX 10 graphics in a slim 15.4-inch portable unit. Additional features of the Area-51 m15x further include BinaryGFX technology (which allows the user to switch between high-performance graphics or integrated graphics) and up to 320GB of hard drive space with SSD or hybrid drives.

The bottom line: The Area-51 m17x enables hardcore gamers to experience interactive outings exactly as game developers intend. Featuring dual graphics processors running in SLI, DirectX 10 technology, Intel Extreme processors, up to three hard drives, and a 17-inch widescreen LCD, hardcore gamers can experience high-quality imagery and soaring frame rates not previously possible on a notebook system.

The Area-51 m15x and Area-51 m17x are also each available in two chassis designs and come equipped with the Alienware Command Center, an exclusive software package that provides access to two Alienware-created programs: AlienFX and AlienFusion Power Management.

In addition, both the Area-51 m15x and Area-51 m17x come equipped with Smart Bays, which allow you to quickly remove the optical drive and swap it out with an additional hard drive or secondary battery, or simply use it as an onboard storage slot.

DELL XPS—DESIGNED FOR PERFORMANCE

While Alienware was busy breaking down barriers in delivering notebooks that would take on the most complex 3D gaming challenges, Dell was also coming into its own, introducing its first gaming notebook, the Inspiron XPS, in May 2004. Dell's follow-up product, the XPS Gen 2, was Dell's first notebook to feature Dell's LightFX technology—LED perimeter lighting in 16 different colors. Dell further refined its gaming notebook offerings in 2006 with the introduction of the XPS M1710, featuring the latest in graphics technology and supporting processor overclocking.

the Go

Alienware Area-51 m15x, the fastest 15.4-inch notebook.

Dell's exclusive XPS M1730 *World of WarCraft* edition lets gamers publicly declare their allegiance to either the Horde or Alliance faction.

But in September 2007, Dell blew the doors off of mobile gaming, unleashing "The Beast"—the XPS M1730. It is the world's first notebook to incorporate AGEIA PhysX™ Mobile Technology and Logitech®'s GamePanel™ LCD. The PhysX processor enables realistic movement and environmental interaction at incredible speeds without degrading overall performance. The GamePanel LCD allows gamers to view game stats, create new macros, and track important system information without leaving the game. In other words, the XPS M1730 delivers unprecedented mobile gaming performance, additionally supporting the overclocking of Intel® Extreme Edition Core™ 2 Duo processors to Bin +2 and featuring NVDIA SLI technology with support for DirectX 10 graphics.

For fans of online gaming, the XPS M1730 is also one of the most handy gaming notebooks available, featuring wireless connectivity through built-in mobile broadband with a sizable selection of wireless carriers as well as your choice of Wi-Fi technology, including Wireless-N. Systems also include a built-in web camera and digital array microphone to see and hear the competition clearly.

EXCITING NEW DEVELOPMENTS

In late November 2007, Dell also introduced a premium 15.4-inch notebook, the XPS M1530, combining sleek and sophisticated design with high-performance technology and features. At first glance, most shoppers wouldn't think of the XPS M1530 as a gaming platform, but don't let its suave and sophisticated demeanor fool you—like a certain über-cool British secret agent, the system is licensed to deliver an outstanding gameplay experience. Powered by an Intel Core 2 Duo processor and the NVIDIA GeForce 8600 GS™ (256MB) graphics solution, the M1530 is perfect for the avid gamer.

Also earlier this month, Dell made a stir in the gaming community by unveiling the XPS M1730 *World of WarCraft*® edition, an exclusive custom version of the XPS M1730 that combines unparalleled gaming performance with the *World of WarCraft* theme.

From the outside in, the XPS M1730 *World of WarCraft* edition is truly one-of-a-kind. The exterior even features *World of WarCraft*–specific designs, with each system declaring allegiance to either the Alliance or Horde. The platform further comes with a variety of *World of WarCraft*–related software pre-installed, including *World of WarCraft* and *World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade*™, plus all major patches. Users can truly personalize their systems with desktop backgrounds and screen savers featuring original artwork from Blizzard as well.

Thankfully, though, as any of these systems can attest, mobile gaming has come a long way. Performance and portability, wireless access anywhere, anytime...what's not to like? And it only gets better from here on out. So while Moore's Law is definitely still in play, you can rest easy knowing that Dell and Alienware continue to keep gamers one step ahead of the curve.

Welcome to *The Club*

SEGA's newest quickly ups the bar for the third-person shooters

Serious gamers take note: SEGA and Bizarre Creations—the developer behind critically acclaimed racing series *Project Gotham Racing*® and Xbox LIVE® Arcade smash hit *Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved*—are delivering a whole new breed of third-person shooter known as *The Club*.

Players take control of a modern-day cast of killers forced to fight for their lives in an underground blood sport controlled by the faceless, obscenely wealthy, influential elite. Battling in abandoned locations spread out across the globe, these modern-day gladiators with guns seek victory for a number of reasons—some for financial gain, some because they have no choice, and some to satisfy their insane bloodlust. No matter the reason, the only thing that guarantees survival is their skill with a gun.

Three of several key areas that make *The Club* a truly great game are:

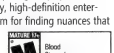
1) Bizarre Creations' proven track record for creating titles that encourage players to come back for "just one more go."
2) *The Club* has a dark backstory written by Gordon Rennie, the comic book writer who has had numerous tales published in famed British anthology *2000 AD*.
3) A brilliant and unique combo and scoring mechanic gives players room for constant improvement.

The combination of these three elements means that players will find an awesome gaming experience wrapped up in a superb backstory—who could ask for more?

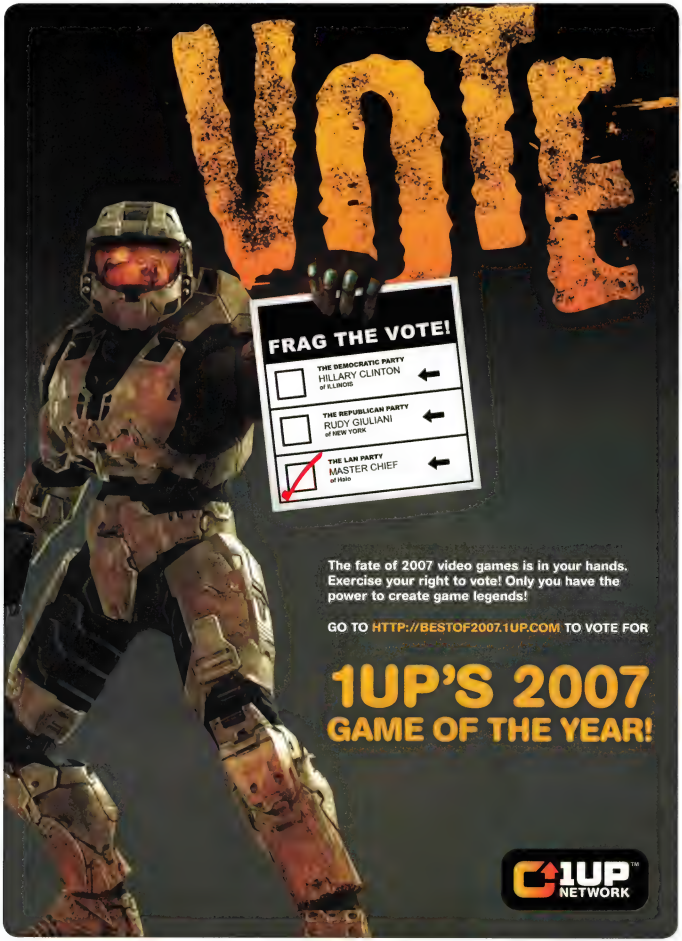
In addition, Rennie provided each of the characters with an in-depth story, and players will discover each contender's true motives and intentions as they battle to dominate their enemies in *The Club*. What's more, two of the eight characters are locked at the very beginning, and each character has a slightly different feel to the way they handle, both in terms of speed and accuracy with certain weapons. On top of this, don't expect to encounter the traditional style of shooter gameplay here either—players will have to think and react fast if they're going to survive this run-and-gun hit. *The Club* also offers gamers yearning for the good old days of four-man split-screen multiplayer exactly that. They can additionally earn respect online in a range of multiplayer modes. Offering everything from leaderboards and death matches to a pack of excitingly unique multiplayer modes, players can face off with seven other opponents online in real-time or stick to battling friends offline in four-player split-screen engagements.

Bizarre Creations also worked hard to create eight magnificent and unusual environments for *The Club*. *The Club* itself is a global network and its members have access to some very interesting settings. Highlights include classical English manor houses, the backstreets of Venice, and shipwrecked ocean liners that are used as playgrounds of death.

In short, *The Club* offers players an exhilarating new gaming experience. There's a rich vein of classic, pure gameplay mixed in with the superior prowess of modern-day, high-definition entertainment. The eight characters allow room for finding nuances that suit individual players, and the eight sprawling environments offer massively varying challenges to even the most hardened gamer.



The Club is out early February 2008 on PC, Xbox 360™ and PLAYSTATION® 3.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Tech

The great graphics card debate

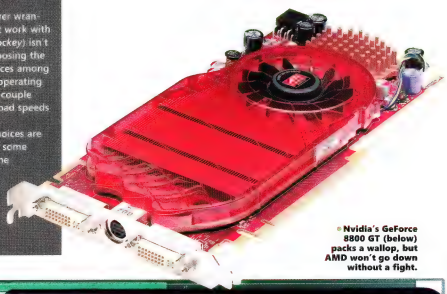
TECH TALK

Do you remember *your* first *dip* into the 3D pool? Driver wrangling on the off chance that an S3 graphics card might work with *Rocket Jockey* (not *Quake*, not *Tomb Raider—Rocket Jockey*) isn't nearly as much fun as it sounds. Not too long ago, choosing the right graphics card meant trying to divine the differences among five separate manufacturers—with as many chipsets—operating in either DirectX or OpenGL. And once you dropped a couple hundred bucks on a board, you relied on 33.6K download speeds to grab driver updates and game patches.

These days, graphics are getting better—and your choices are getting simpler. Over the next few pages, we'll look at some kick-ass cards that'll break the sound barrier but not the bank (or your brain).

But before digging in: A huge shout-out goes to Jason Cross and the fine folks at ExtremeTech.com. This month's Tech section wouldn't have been possible without their awesome work.

Darren Gladstone, Senior Editor



Nvidia's GeForce 8800 GT (below) packs a wallop, but AMD won't go down without a fight.

GRAPHICS CARD

AMD and Nvidia gun for your 3D dollars

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HEAD-TO-HEAD

SHOOTOUT

BEN GLADSTONE

The question "What graphics card should I buy?" has appeared in our inbox approximately 7,834 times over the past five years—not that anyone is counting. For gamers, the GPU in your system is often more important than whether or not you have Intel inside. The big guns of 2007—*Crysis, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Half-Life 2: Episode Two,* and *World in Conflict*—all look great if you've got serious graphics firepower and a DirectX 10–ready rig. But in order to light it up, you need to consider snagging a high-octane graphics card—or possibly even two.

Fortunately, right now something exists for every budget and every system, from the expensive, high-end, power-hungry monsters like the GeForce 8800 GTX Ultra or Radeon HD 2900 XT to inexpensive setups designed to wean you off of motherboard-integrated "graphics solutions." Regardless of where you fall on the disposable income scale, competitive AMD (the CPU manufacturer acquired the artist formerly known as ATI) and Nvidia both provide viable 3D options. But which chipmaker do you go with?

AMD OR NVIDIA?

The short answer is: It doesn't *really* matter. Oh, sure, you'll find fanboys on both sides of the fence, but trying to name an undisputed champ is never a clear-cut case (even recommending Nvidia's 8800 GT comes with conditions). Both companies provide good—and frequently updated—drivers while constantly working to patch the newest games. We use both brands constantly and don't find an appreciable difference in stability or glitches between them. There are anecdotal horror stories about cards from each vendor—and we've heard them all—but with this newest round of graphics cards, AMD is back up in Nvidia's face. The two big GPU-makers continue trading blows with dramatically different experiences from one game to the next. It's a good competitive landscape, really. Just make sure you always have the latest drivers and pick up the best board in your price range.

HOW MUCH DO YOU NEED?

You don't buy graphics cards—you rent 'em. The average life span of a GPU is about one to two years. Within that time, your high-end screamer eventually finds itself running alongside newer budget cards—and that's when you enter a vicious cycle. You'll either overclock to the point of a Chernobyl-esque meltdown or you'll start eyeballing the newest, baddest boards on the block that, of course, cost another $600. So, for the sake of sanity, let's start at the bottom and work our way up.

AGP (ACCELERATED GRAPHICS PORT)

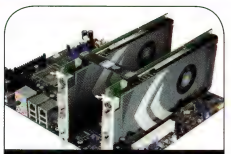
In 1997, AGP was king. Pretty much any graphics card worth anything fit into an AGP slot. But if you have an AGP-based system in 2007 and you're still praying to keep that aging rig afloat, you're near the end of your run. With lowered settings (and lowered expectations), you may still be able to play current games. And if you don't have the cash to upgrade to the next big thing just yet, a few AGP stopgaps can delay the jump a little longer.

You can find Radeon HD 2600 Pro cards for around $100. Don't buy these for DirectX 10 compatibility, of course—you *really* think you'll snap off a few high-res rounds in *Crysis* on a low-end machine? On the higher end, you can still find GeForce 7950 GT and Radeon X1950 Pro cards for between $200 and $300. These will give your old machine that last gasp before a proper funeral. Our advice: Pull the plug.

PCIE (PCI EXPRESS)

Since 2004, this has been the preferred slot type—and at this point in PC gaming, it's tough to find a card that *isn't* PCI Express. Since you have plenty of PCIe options, we'll narrow it down to a good pick for both the Nvidia and AMD camps in each price range. >

THANKS TO TECH ADVANCES, YOU DON'T BUY GRAPHICS CARDS—YOU RENT 'EM.



DOUBLE YOUR PLEASURE

Dual-carding is an option, too

What's this SLI and CrossFire business all about, and why would anyone even consider it? First, an explanation for those playing at home: SLI is Nvidia's way to let you double up on graphics cards and theoretically get some extra juice out of your GeForce hardware. AMD's version, CrossFire, does the same thing for Radeon boards. The general concept is that two graphics cards are better than one, but how does it work in practice?

Obviously, there's the whole money issue. Shelling out for that powerhouse 8800 GTX is painful enough as it is, let alone for two. Just because the motherboard has two PCIe slots doesn't mean you have to use both...at least not yet. Spend that cash on one beefy sucker, and then play the waiting game (you know, in addition to playing the crap out of all the new games this year). By the time performance starts lacking, chances are you can pick up a twin on the cheap, essentially giving your setup its second wind.

That's one way to do it. For those willing to do a bit of extra homework, another smart SLI option comes from pairing two cheaper cards to match the performance of a powerful single card. Obviously this entails staring at a few benchmark spreadsheets and graphs, but it can shave some precious dollar signs off that upgrade price tag. Especially with the recent release of Nvidia's GeForce 8800 GT—this sweetheart ranks in just under the GTX for about half the price. Or double up for some serious performance cranking. Remember, as with any other hardware consideration, it's all about comparing cost efficiency against performance. And thanks to the 8800 GT, you can get the best of both worlds.

Frankly, though, running a single GPU will give you better stability over dual cards. Don't mind running the redline to squeeze out some extra speed? Then give it a shot. ■ **Alice Liang**

GEFORCE 8800 GT

Nvidia's mighty mite takes expensive cards to task

PRODUCT: **GeForce 8800 GT** MANUFACTURER: **Nvidia** PRICE: **$250**

Review

Thanks to the GT's 65-nanometer technology, this card is cooler, smaller, and not nearly as power-hungry as the current top dogs like Nvidia's 8800 GTX or AMD's Radeon HD 2900 XT. The upshot is that the 8800 GT is significantly faster than previous-generation cards, including Nvidia's $180 8800 GTS—and there's room to overclock.

The 8800 GT marks the first appearance in the wild of the Nvidia G92 GPU, built with a gang of newer technologies. Among them: a VP2 video processor for H.264 bitstream processing, the ability to drive HDCP-locked 4K resolutions over dual DVI links, and PCIe 2.0 support. However, we're not sold about all the shader and rendering optimizations that allow a seemingly tiny card to produce big benchmark numbers.

AMD still has a big ace in the hole—Team Fortress 2, but among World in Conflict run well in DirectX 10 on the 8800 GT was a huge surprise. In fact, it's only a few frames behind the beefier, pricier $405MB 8800 GTS. Disabling AA (antialiasing) and AF (anisotropic filtering) lets you play World in Conflict in DX10 with all the graphics options jacked. Nice too shabby for a $250 card.

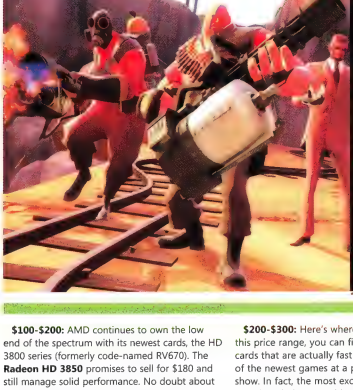
So, ultimately, the question becomes "Is it worth the money?" Well yes—but we're still not entirely certain how much money that is. Nvidia boldly strode out of the gate saying we'd set prices as low as $200—though good luck finding one of those 256MB GPUs lying around. We tested a XFX GeForce 8800 GT Alpha Dog Edition (512 MB RAM at 600MHz clock speed), though many flavors of the 8800 GT exist with varying degrees of RAM and clocked at different speeds. Since vendors are either piling on additional RAM or overclocking the card, we've seen 8800 GTs selling for about $250 on average and reaching as high as $333. That doesn't mean we don't want one.

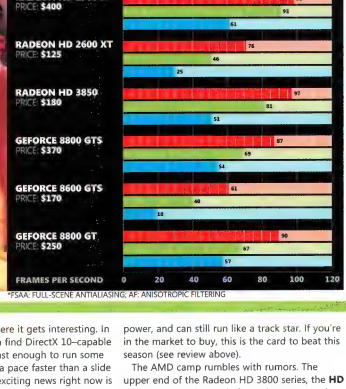
VERDICT

- **Nvidia delivers a fantastic performance card.**
- **The mythical $200 value boards are hard to find at press time.**

10/10 EXCELLENT

Games for Windows





*FSAA: FULL-SCENE ANTIALIASING; AF: ANISOTROPIC FILTERING

$100-$200: AMD continues to own the low end of the spectrum with its newest cards, the HD 3800 series (formerly code-named RV670). The **Radeon HD 3850** promises to sell for $180 and still manage solid performance. No doubt about it, if you're pinching pennies, this is one of the best budget-friendly cards around (see pg. 93).

Nvidia fans have options as well, of course—provided you can find it on store shelves. A baseline 256MB version of the **GeForce 8800 GT** lurks somewhere. Nvidia swears. We just couldn't find one in time for this issue.

$200-$300: Here's where it gets interesting. In this price range, you can find DirectX 10–capable cards that are actually fast enough to run some of the newest games at a pace faster than a slide show. In fact, the most exciting news right now is that throttled-up graphics are now possible from a $200-ish graphics card with the introduction of **Nvidia's GeForce 8800 GT**, which effectively replaces the more expensive 8800 GTS—and performs amazingly well. The 8800 GT features almost the exact opposite design of your typical graphics card—it's slim, doesn't draw much power, and can still run like a track star. If you're in the market to buy, this is the card to beat this season (see review above).

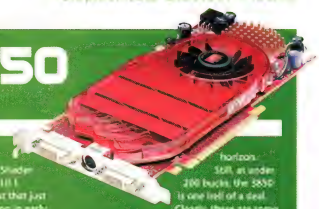
The AMD camp rumbles with rumors. The upper end of the Radeon HD 3800 series, the **HD 3870**, wasn't quite ready for review at press time. On paper, this low power–consumption card looks like it could run alongside the 8800 GT for less money, but without the hardware to back up the tough talk, we can't know for sure.

$300 and above: The choices are clear for the moment...at least until the next monster card

RADEON HD 3850

AMD's budget board breaks hearts

PRODUCT: **Radeon HD 3850** MANUFACTURER: **AMD** PRICE: **$180**



REVIEW

EDITORS' CHOICE

Games for Windows

AMD is officially back in the game. After falling it in the guts for over a couple of product cycles, Radeon HD 3850 cards prove that you won't need to spend a fortune (yeah, that's all relative) to play games smoothly, nor do Nvidia happened, the 3850's rallying cry is green and giveaway. The difference is that AMD's option costs under $200.

The result might see card prices go down—but we all manage to get across splitting screens of nine Radeon HD 2900 XT. With the cut-rate GPU comes a host of enhancements that make the deal even sweeter. Among the highlights: a UVD video decoder for HD content, geometry shader optimizations, Shader Model 4.1 support, and DirectX 10.1.

Whoa, DX10.1? Yeah, don't sweat that just yet. DX10.1 is a free upgrade coming in early 2008, just makes some of the optional things in DX10 mandatory. It's not "the next big thing"—and you won't see DX 10.1–only games for some time—just know that it's coming.

Our best results come from a card with 256MB of VRAM and some of the results border on unplayable. In Team Fortress 2, this card can't push the 8800 GT by as many as 10 frames per second. If ripping on antialiasing, though, yanks the rug from underneath AMD. The 3850 puts up a good fight in World in Conflict—but once you switch over to DirectX 10 mode, it's clear that this is a losing battle. Just keep in mind that the HD 3870's 512MB frame buffer, going for about $30 more, is on the horizon.

Still, at under 200 bucks, the 3850 is one hell of a deal. Clearly, there are some cases where AMD needs to work on improving its drivers. But if your biggest concern is having the muscle to run any DX9 game at high resolutions with maximum settings, you're all set. We just think that the 8800 GT's DirectX 10 performance will serve you better down the road.

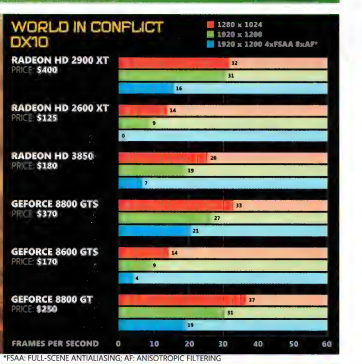
VERDICT

- **Amazing price-to-performance ratio.**
- **Didn't perform as well in all games—especially in DX10 mode.**

9/10

EXCELLENT

Games for Windows



*FSAA: FULL-SCENE ANTIALIASING; AF: ANISOTROPIC FILTERING

lumbers along in early 2008. If you have the PSU juice (650-plus watts) and ample room in your case, buy Nvidia's **GeForce 8800 GTX** (the Ultra's speed boost isn't big enough to justify the extra dinero). Over-the-top in just about every way, these cards continue to kick out solid scores in benchmark tests.

On the other side of the high-end fence, welcome back to the nebulous AMD information zone. Once upon a time, the only game in town was the Radeon HD 2900 XT. This card has some issues with high-power draw and noise, but it's a solid performer—sometimes keeping pace with the more costly 8800 GTX. We do know that AMD is working feverishly on a new powerhouse for early 2008, but until then, Nvidia's still at the top of the game.

THE NEXT BIG THING

And when AMD's next cards do come out, we'll no doubt be fielding a new wave of that same classic question: "What graphics card should I buy?" As long as new games keep pushing past the performance redline, we don't mind.

IF YOU'RE ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET, AMD'S RADEON HD 3850 GIVES YOU GREAT DX9 PERFORMANCE.

TECH TU

Graphics card tips and tools

Horoush Ghazi

Horoush Ghazi is the founder of TweakGuides.com.

HOW-TO

Card-crushing games such as *Crysis* are finally upon us. However, getting the best gaming performance doesn't end with just going out and buying the latest and greatest graphics card. Given the videocard focus of this month's Tech section, I wanted to share with you a collection of handy tips and tools that will help you both optimize and learn more about your graphics card.

GRAPHICS HARDWARE

First things first: You need to know the exact details of the graphics hardware you're running. The quick and easy way to do this is to download and run the free GPU-Z utility (see "Tech Toolbox," above, for this and other software mentioned throughout this article). It will tell you at a glance virtually everything about your graphics card's specifications and capabilities, from the obvious to the obscure.

GPU facts and figures galore.

GRAPHICS SOFTWARE

Graphics cards need specific drivers to run properly. Drivers are the "translators" between your operating system and the hardware, and even the fastest graphics cards can wind up performing like some gimpy dog if the drivers aren't up-to-date, correctly installed, and optimally configured.

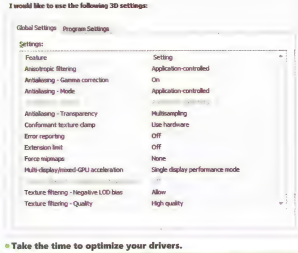
Even though your graphics card comes with a driver disc, I can't stress enough that you need to download and install the latest available version of the driver for your card directly from the ATI or Nvidia driver site as relevant (see "The Toolbox," above). Every new driver version has improvements and bug fixes specifically designed for the latest games. If you have the option of using an even newer official beta (prerelease) driver, go for it. Official betas are usually very stable and sometimes necessary for playing just-released games.

Before installing any new driver, you must always uninstall any previous drivers to ensure there are no conflicts or problems. The following "clean install" method can prevent a great many issues people often experience:

1) Go to your Windows Control Panel and open Add/Remove Programs in Windows XP or Programs and Features in Windows Vista, find any Nvidia and/or ATI items, and uninstall any existing display driver entries. (If you have an nForce motherboard, be careful not to accidentally remove your networking drivers.)
2) Reboot your system. If upon restart you're prompted to search for and install new drivers, click Cancel. Now run the free Driver Sweeper utility to clean out any remaining traces of previous graphics drivers.
3) Reboot your system once more and proceed with the installation of your new graphics driver by launching the installer and following the prompts as you normally would.

I recommend doing this every time you install a new driver. These steps are particularly important if you've recently upgraded your graphics card or switched brands from ATI to Nvidia (or vice versa).

Finally, to understand and correctly configure all the various options in your graphics card's control panel, as well as to get the details on advanced graphics tweaking, make sure to read the ATI Catalyst Tweak Guide or Nvidia Forceware Tweak Guide (see "The Toolbox," above).



Take the time to optimize your drivers.

MONITORING TEMPERATURES

A modern graphics card generates quite a lot of heat during gaming. In fact, games often glitch or crash due to graphics cards overheating, so you need to constantly monitor your temperatures. For ATI owners, there's a built-in temperature monitoring utility in your Catalyst Control Center called ATI Overdrive; for Nvidia owners, you'll need to install the free nTune utility to monitor GPU temperatures. Keep in mind that excess heat from other components in your system can overheat graphics cards, so it's equally important

WATCH THE TREELINE
OH SAY, CAN YOU SEA...?
Obviously water can look a ton better in DirectX 10, but take a close look at the reflections in the water. If you tweak software options enough, this won't be a slideshow.

to monitor your general system temperatures. An easy way to do this is to use the free SpeedFan utility.

VIDEO MEMORY USAGE

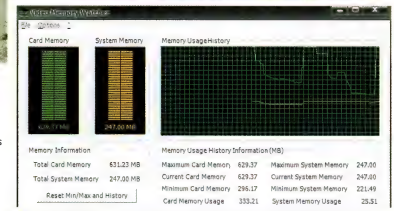
One of the causes of game stuttering (covered in *GFW* #11, pg. 94) is a lack of available video RAM (VRAM). A quick way to diagnose the issue is to check your hard drive light whenever you get any pauses or stuttering. If the drive is barely in use when a stutter occurs, it's likely a lack of VRAM that's the culprit. However, if you want to be more scientific about tracking down VRAM-related issues, run the free Video Memory Watcher utility in the background whenever you game, and you'll quickly see exactly how much VRAM gets used.

BENCHMARKING

If you want to know how your graphics card stacks up against others, or if you suspect you're not getting as many frames per second as you should, the only real way to find out is to benchmark your system. Free synthetic benchmarks such as 3DMark for DirectX 9 or RightMark2 for DirectX 10 work well enough. However, the best way to benchmark your card is to compare real-world results in recent games. Most games have a demo-recording functionality you can use or, in a pinch, you can devise a set walkthrough of a particularly strenuous area in a game. Then, using the benchmarking capabilities of the free utility Fraps, you can see your minimum, maximum, and average framerates during the demo run or walkthrough. You can share the demo with others or specify your walkthrough path with them and see what results they manage to get at the exact same settings.

The tips above will help you squeeze every ounce of performance you can out of your hardware. When you're ready to dive deeper, go to TweakGuides.com for more thorough breakdowns of all the topics covered here.

■ **Koroush Ghazi**



Coming up short on memory? Use the free Video Memory Watcher utility to check.

NE-UP

GREENSPEAK

Because we have the extra page

YOU SAY YOU WANT A RESOLUTION?

Well, you know...we'd all love to save our games

COLUMN

Jeff Green

Along with vowing to be more awesome in 2008, Jeff also resolves to finally finish *Baldur's Gate II*. LOL at him at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

While it is a popular tradition amongst common people to compose heartfelt "New Year's resolutions" at this time of year, I have always abstained from it, because, I mean, quite honestly, what am I supposed to write? "Be more awesome"? Nevertheless, I don't want you to finish this issue thinking that we here at *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine* aren't in the holiday spirit just because *I'm* too great to need resolutions. That isn't fair to you, the reader. This is why I have decided instead to devote our final page of 2007 to suggest some New Year's resolutions for the gamemakers and publishers, who, as much as I love them, clearly need my help. If you are a gamemaker or publisher, feel free to clip this article out (after you buy the magazine, please) and staple it to one of your coworkers' heads for easy reference.

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN DETOY

IN 2008, YOU HEREBY RESOLVE TO:

Play something else other than your own damn game.
Hey, Sparky, guess what? That revolutionary new game you keep telling us you're working on? We've played five games just like that this month already. No, really. I actually have seen space marines before. Honest. And, yes, those could hover, too. And, no, seriously, I really have seen a combat system that looks just like yours. Well, not quite like yours. Theirs wasn't lame and derivative. If you're not playing your competitors' games, yours sucks already. I promise.

Design a game box that won't make people think I'm a pervert or moron if they see me with it.
That means less gigantic blue alien breasts, or anything like that. OK? Enough already. My mom still visits me. I don't want to have to hide this stuff. Yes, yes, I like gigantic blue alien breasts as well as the next perverted moron, don't worry. We're still on the same team. But that doesn't mean we need to let everyone else know about it.

Tune your gameplay for someone other than yourself.
Hey, I know you're hardcore. Right on, bro. But if your game is so difficult that only *you* can beat it, then maybe *we're* not the ones with the problem. Try rebalancing your game in a way that lets us mere mortals play along without hating your freaking guts.

Focus less on quantity, and more on quality.
Repeat after me: "Numbers aren't impressive!" No one is going to care if your game has 35 different types of enemies, 85 different levels, or 1 million different possibilities for your character's face if they all suck. Instead of creating 300 different chins, how about just making three good ones? It's a chin. Unless it fires laser beams or is so long that it allows me to carry an extra weapon, I don't care what it looks like, and no one else does either. Really.

Give us real, honest system requirements.
If you say your game only needs a 1.8GHz CPU and 512MB of RAM to run, please make sure you can say that out loud without busting out laughing. If your first-person shooter looks like *Myst* on my machine, even though you promised I could play it, I'm not going to be laughing with you.

Hire real writers to write your game's dialogue.
Or if you insist on writing it yourself, double-check that you have actually interacted with other humans at some point in your life and have some familiarity with how people talk. Most of us don't speak in a nonstop stream of ultimatums or smartass quips. Nor do we preface everything we say with four sentences of lore. I, Jeff Green, son of Zanville, elder son of the great Gruenapfel clan, who came to these mighty shores over a century ago to plant our seed in this new world, to prosper and grow and make the world safe again for all decent people, would like to read something less fruity in my games now and then, please.

Learn human anatomy from a book other than those from DC or Marvel.
Hey, I know what I said about gigantic blue alien breasts above. That's still OK. But try a little variety once in a while, too. Not every guy needs to have arms the size of small trees, especially since most of us playing your game have spindly little girly arms and feel insecure looking at these dudes all the time.

Remember that not all of us sit at our computers 24/7 like you and may want to save our games now and then.
Finally, and this may sound crazy, some of us are going to have other things to do and will need to stop playing your masterpiece from time to time. So put a decent save system in your game and don't whine that it ruins the experience. You know what ruins the experience? Me breaking my keyboard in half because you keep making me replay entire chunks of your game over and over because you stubbornly refused to provide adequate checkpoints or let me save anywhere. It's 2008 now. So stop designing like it's 1988. And happy New Year!

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TEEN
T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Mild Suggestive Themes
Language
Violence

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

SIERRA
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THE WAY IT'S MEANT TO BE PLAYED

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